

Running head: CRITICAL MEDIA LITERACY AND DISNEY

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: Critical Media Literacy and Disney Female Characters

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Abstract

The purpose of this research project was to use a qualitative approach to explore Critical Media Literacy (CML) with young girls by collaboratively analyzing Disney animated films. My goal was to provide a safe and encouraging space for children to share their perspectives and opinions of Disney animated female characters featured in *The Little Mermaid* (Ashman, Musker, & Clements, 1989), *Cinderella* (Disney, Geronimi, Jackson, & Luske, 1950), and *The Princess and the Frog* (Del Vecho, Clements, & Musker, 2009). I used CML as my theoretical framework as it provided an inquisitive approach to watching films, which, in turn, encouraged the participants to use critical thinking pertaining to the images of female characters in Disney. I also incorporated feminist theory as the majority of discussion revolved around the physical appearance of female characters as well as the participants' understandings of femininity. I conducted two focus groups with 4 young girls, aged 7 to 11, to gain insight into their understanding of Disney female characters. An inquisitive and collaborative approach to watching films revealed three themes: (a) powerful women in Disney are mean and ugly; (b) heterosexual relationships are paramount; and (c) Disney Princesses are always pretty and nice. I concluded by recommending the importance of CML and collaborative film-watching with young children as the simplicity of asking questions encourages young people to become aware of, challenge, and think critically about the media they are consuming.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Background/Context of Study

This research stems from personal experience concerning the impact Disney female characters may have on girls. I remember Disney as a signifier of childhood happiness; however, university has opened a space for discussion on Disney characters, both positive and negative. Not until university was I exposed to the intrusive and identity-shaping ideologies presented by Disney and the effects Disney characters might have on children. I was raised with Disney films as a form of entertainment and joy throughout my childhood and, therefore, do not intend to completely boycott the Disney Corporation or suggest Disney is harmful to children. Instead, it is my understanding that Disney can be a tool that may help young girls navigate femininity by watching Disney films through a critical lens. Jesse Gainer (2007) refers to this lens as the “pleasure-critique nexus” or a space that is created for children to engage critically with media texts without sacrificing the pleasure and sense of enjoyment and passion that is associated with those texts. According to Gainer (2007), both aspects must be considered equally important when talking to children about movies, television shows, and other forms of entertainment they consume: engaging a critical lens and drawing pleasure from the text. My thesis pays particular attention to this double imperative, and I have endeavoured not to steer too far in one direction or the other, but to maintain a balance of respect for children’s love of Disney, but also the absolute importance of engaging young people in critical thinking about this powerful matrix.

Disney animated films were a highlight of my childhood and many hours were spent consuming Disney entertainment. Among the classics, my favourite animated films included *Cinderella* (Disney, Geronimi, Jackson, & Luske, 1950), *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (Cottrell, Hand, & Disney, 1937), *The Lion King* (Dewey, Hahn, McArthur, Schumacter, Allers,

& Minkoff, 1994), and *Aladdin* (Clements, Ernst, Musker, Pell, Clements, & Musker, 1992). I enjoyed the stories immensely; yet, it was the female characters in Disney films that always captured my attention. It was during my childhood that I would use the images provided by Disney to imagine what my life would be like as an adult woman. The whole package of a Disney film would consume my imagination and cause me to envision myself as the characters in the film. It was the combination of the beautiful Princess and her stunning gowns, complemented by the catchy sing-along songs, and the utopian happily-ever-after that enthralled me as a child.

This research will focus on exploring Disney films with young girls in order to aid them in exposure to Critical Media Literacy (CML) which encourages them to become active agents when consuming media images. Specifically, this research engages young girls in CML in order to become active agents in consuming media. This research will provide a platform for young girls to contribute to the existing information about Disney and its perceived connection to and impact on young girls. Recognizing Disney as an educational tool and using Disney's displays of femininity, the girls in this study analyzed ideologies present in particular animated films for the purposes of opening up dialogue about what CML is, how it can be used, and why it is an important skill to acquire, particularly in relation to girls' viewing of Disney films. CML skills can provide the opportunity for girls to assess texts and images in relation to understanding the "relationships between power and domination" that underlie and form texts (Gainer, 2007, pp. 107). Therefore, CML enables girls to understand immediate images while simultaneously reading between the lines and beyond the screen (Gainer, 2007).

In order to facilitate a discussion of Disney films in relation to CML, I selected film clips that were viewed with the girls in my two focus groups that included various representations of

female characters. For example, discussion on the Princesses' physical and stereotypical roles were addressed and analyzed with the use of CML strategies. Discussion contrasted the Princesses to the evil female characters in order to provide a space where girls in the study might become aware of the different roles women take in Disney films. Issues of heterosexuality were also addressed, along with gender. The films that were analyzed include: *Cinderella* (Disney, Geronimi, Jackson, & Luske, 1950), *The Little Mermaid* (Ashman, Musker, & Clements, 1989), and *The Princess and the Frog* (Del Vecho, Clements, & Musker, 2009). These films were specifically chosen as they feature the most popular and original Princesses. Furthermore, I have also analyzed *The Princess and the Frog* (Del Vecho, Clements, & Musker, 2009), a more recent Disney film, which reflects Disney's attempt to make advancements with female characters, such as featuring an African American Princess.

Research Question

This study explored the following question: How might critical media literacy skills create a space for discussion and promote awareness of ideologies in Disney films for girls?

Theoretical Framework

Critical Theory and Its Key Players

I employ critical theory as the theoretical framework for this research. Critical theory is a theoretical tradition that grew out of the Frankfurt School of thought in Frankfurt, Germany during the 1930s and through World War II. The Frankfurt School comprised a conglomeration of theorists, including Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, and Erich Fromm. These theorists took Marxist thought as the basis for social liberation (Corradetti, 2011). However, rather than following Marx and solely focusing on capitalism as the basis for oppression in society, theorists in the Frankfurt School broadened Marxist thinking to include

other social categories (Finlayson, 2005). Through this expansion of Marxist thought, the Frankfurt School pioneered a wave of critical thinking that created a social and political way to be critical of, and thus transform, society for the better (Finlayson, 2005). The Frankfurt School theorists were some of the earliest to question issues such as morality, religion, science, reason, and rationality from several perspectives (Finlayson, 2005). They suggested that bringing several perspectives together would challenge the narrow ideas that contested natural science as the only valid point of view.

The development of critical theory emerged in a particular sociopolitical context. Critical theorists were reacting against the fascist and anti-Semitic doctrine of Nazism in Europe. The theorists were reacting to the extreme leftism and domination in a National Socialist society during Hitler's reign in the 1930s. The work of the Frankfurt School was no longer allowed to take place in Germany under Hitler's rule as the theorists questioned complexities of modern social life, which was in opposition to Hitler's extremism. In order to flee Nazi persecution of the Jews, the location of the Frankfurt School was transferred to the United States (Brincat, 2011). In turn, critical theory is used to "disrupt and challenge the status quo" and therefore the creation of critical theory developed because the "world was in urgent need of reinterpretation" (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2002, pp. 87-88).

Max Horkheimer, central in the evolution of critical theory and a key thinker in the Frankfurt School, made a powerful distinction between "traditional" and "critical" theory in the 1930s (Brincat, 2011). Traditional theory included areas, such as mathematics and natural science, both of which aim to bring about correct or "true" understanding (Brincat, 2011). The progression of critical theory reflected on the social context and function within society (Finlayson, 2005). Horkheimer faced a challenge that paralleled Theodore Adorno's introductory

thesis, which suggested that philosophy was no longer “conclusive, prescriptive or definitive: its sole remaining task was to foster a mutual critique of itself and the world” (Brincat, 2011, pp. 220). Horkheimer and Adorno both felt that citizens could no longer blindly look at the world, but instead needed to become critical agents, and suggested that human beings should begin to consciously speculate and redirect their thoughts and actions towards reason (Brincat, 2011).

The basis of critical theory was built on understanding contextual background with an antipositivist outlook. Antipositivism is a critique of positivism, which insists that knowledge can only result from direct observation and measurement; anything else would be unscientific and thus incorrect (Hayes, 2000). Positivism has four main features: (a) assumptions of causality; (b) emphasis that the observer is completely independent of what is being observed; (c) scientific knowledge as value-free as it occurs independently of culture and social context; and (d) science as a consistent methodology (Hayes, 2000). The antipositivist movement within critical theory rejected these notions and placed emphasis on understanding the individual’s experiences of and in the world (Hayes, 2000). Hayes (2000) suggests that “anti-positivists see social reality as actively and consciously created by individuals” (pp. 8). Antipositivism, thus, argues that human social life is not objective; instead, it is based on personal meaning and intentional participation (Hayes, 2000).

Ideology

Rooted in Marxist theory, ideology and its analysis are key components of critical theory. Faber (2004) suggests ideology emerged from the philosophical suspicion of the possibility of a gap between reality and the way reality was perceived. A basic understanding of ideology provides insight into two functions. The first way of understanding ideology is to address how meaning can be used to maintain power (Faber, 2004). The second refers to how ideology

promotes a relation between individuals and the “social collective” to which individuals belong (Faber, 2004). As a theoretical concept, ideology explores the interaction between the individual and the collective, and how they ultimately shape each other. Faber (2004) explains ideology as a “conceptual confusion in which certain social phenomena are endowed with a false ontological status” (pp. 139). As cited in Gerring (1997), Adorno (1950) defines ideology as “an organization of opinions, attitudes, and values – a way of thinking about man [sic] and society” (pp. 2). To further the definition, Schiff (2003) refers to ideology as lived relations that justify and explain, “the way things are.” In turn, ideology then exists within and is part of a social structure, allowing one to “construct and reproduce” the social structure by creating conditions “that encourage one to accept the existing distribution of power and resources, both in the material sense and the nonmaterial sense” (pp. 494). Furthermore, ideology can be understood as a systematic set of beliefs – a worldview that is categorized by conceptual schemes (Corradetti, 2011). Incorporating these definitions, my own understanding of ideology is the conscious and/or unconscious ideas that foster a comprehensive way of viewing the world, which are accepted without question. Ideologies are difficult to pinpoint and thus question; disguised as taken-for-granted truths that masquerade as common sense, ideologies are the hidden meanings beneath our everyday realities. My thesis is thus an exercise in locating and challenging the ideologies that float beneath the surface of Disney films in order to pull back the curtains on these taken-for-granted truths and reveal them to be forms of constructed knowledge that structure our way of thinking about the world.

The ideologies in Disney films are both overtly and covertly displayed through plotlines, characterization, dress, looks, and music. In the documentary, *Mickey Mouse Monopoly* (Sun & Picker, 2000), numerous ideologies relating to gender, class, and nationhood are identified. For

example, the majority of the Princesses are passive, domesticated females waiting to be rescued by the brave, assertive Prince. In conjunction with this ideological construction of gender, Disney also equates female power with evil and ugly characters, such as Ursula the Sea Witch in *The Little Mermaid* (Ashman, Musker, & Clements, 1989). These embedded ideologies are then neatly disguised as a form of innocent entertainment through Disney's use of fantasy, upbeat musical numbers, and imagination—all elements of popular culture that appeal specifically to children. This research thus focused on providing a platform for young girls to identify, question, and become aware of ideologies in Disney films.

Critical Media Literacy

Critical theory promotes examining and critiquing society as a whole by unearthing the underlying ideologies by which society is governed. CML grew out of critical theory as CML critique of society often included more specific components, such as media and popular culture. Critical theory is generally used to critique literary works and address the interpretation and understanding of literary pieces (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2002). CML is a branch of critical theory and comprises the theoretical framework of this research. CML is defined as, “a pedagogy that positions students to analyze relations among media, audiences, information, and power to produce alternative media texts that challenge messages in dominant discourse” (Kellner & Share, 2007, pp. 62). Moreover, CML encourages viewers to draw “on their cultural resources and life experience as they deconstruct, debate, resist, and reimagine dominant narratives” (Kellner & Share, 2007, pp. 63).

Drawing upon Kellner and Share (2005), CML is comprised of five core concepts. The first concept suggests the “principle of non-transparency,” or that all media messages are constructed, shaped, and positioned through a specific process; one, which does not present

reality like a transparent window (Kellner & Share, 2005, pp. 374). The second concept discusses “codes and conventions” to help us distinguish between “connotation and denotation and signifier and signified” (Kellner & Share, 2005, pp. 374). In other words, children are encouraged to separate what they see or hear from how they think or feel in order to deconstruct the highly coded media texts. This process, seemingly more difficult, is a strategy that can be learned through CML. The third concept addresses how different people experience the same media message in different ways (Kellner & Share, 2005). Interpretations and understanding of specific media images can differ depending on the consumer. The fourth concept focuses on content and message, which helps students to recognize the subjective nature of all media texts (Kellner & Share, 2005). The fifth concept requires students to consider the question of why the message was sent and where it comes from in order to become aware that media are organized to gain profit and/or power (Kellner & Share, 2005).

Kellner and Share (2007) use the metaphor of an iceberg to further explain CML. Many students have the ability to analyze the obvious parts of media, the part of the iceberg that is exposed atop the water. However, CML allows people to not only analyze the exposed iceberg, but also the entirety of the iceberg that is submerged underwater; the invisible becomes visible. This will allow children to see beyond the immediately visible aspects of Disney films and explore below the surface of Disney characters, which may contain the “embedded ideological notions of white supremacy, capitalist patriarchy, classism, homophobia, and other oppressive forces” (Kellner & Share, 2007, pp. 8).

CML not only teaches students to learn from and constructively use media, but to resist its manipulation forces, and also to develop skills that will “help create good citizens and that will make individuals more motivated and competent participants in social life” (Kellner &

Share, 2005, pp. 372). The use of CML allows viewers to become agents in the construction of their own interpretations of media texts. The importance of this theoretical framework is that it enables children to gain power over and knowledge from their culture rather than being passive recipients of media, thus enabling them to create personal meanings and identities that may result in transforming the world around them. The understanding of the social construction of knowledge through media interpretations enables young people to expand critical inquiry into all outlets of their lives. Children become active agents in the process of media interpretation, allowing them to deconstruct injustices, express their own voice, and, in turn, create a better society.

Critical Media Literacy & Disney

Giroux and Pollock (2010) suggest “animated films operate on many registers; one of the most persuasive is the role they play as the new ‘teaching machines’ as producers of culture” (pp. 164). Therefore, films can be learning tools for children, especially because “film discourses engage viewers not simply in the active construction of knowledge but also in the construction of knowledge from a particular point of view” (Gainer, 2007, pp. 365). The Disney Corporation owns the majority of media that children consume, allowing Disney to provide children with a limited worldview, skewed and dominated by corporate interests. Often children and parents do not have the tools necessary to critically analyze the images provided by Disney. Both parents and children are capable of gathering the means necessary to become critical viewers of media; however, a lack of awareness of the importance of these tools is preventing the critical conversations.

Disney is a “global cultural institution that fiercely struggles to protect its mythical status as purveyor of moral virtue” (Giroux & Pollock, 2010, pp. 93). For this research, “moral” holds

much significance as it is the element of the good woman, the Princess, as she is reaffirmed by her morality. Disney is one of the primary institutions constructing childhood culture around the globe; Giroux and Pollock (2010) suggest that Disney warrants healthy suspicion and critical debate. Giroux and Pollock (2010) also advocate that “Disney films will have *better* educational and entertainment value the more young people think about the conscious and unconscious messages and effects the films promote while resisting the temptation to view them as non-ideological” (pp. 99). Furthermore, Disney films resonate powerfully with dominant perceptions and meanings because of the context in which they are situated. Giroux and Pollock (2010) suggest the need to critically analyze how the “privileged dominant readings of Disney’s animated films work to generate and affirm particular pleasures, desires, and subject positions that define for young people specific notions of agency and social possibility” (pp. 103). This analysis can be accomplished with the use of critical media literacy, which allows children and others to read films “within, against, and outside the dominant codes” (Giroux & Pollock, 2010, pp. 103).

The development of CML provides a space for children to question images and ideologies presented in Disney films. Children may not have definite answers to questions, but the questions are asked in order for children to critically think about the entertainment to which they are exposed. The notion of hidden ideologies is “not necessarily invented by Disney, but what they do with these notions is caricature them, wrap them up in magic kingdom wrapper and sell them to children; that is the power of Disney” (Sun & Picker, 2002). CML will allow children to critique these wrapped up notions and, in turn, create space to challenge the information provided by Disney. The importance of CML is that it does not force a child to choose whether Disney is good or bad; instead it allows space for questioning. Children may not

be aware of the hidden ideologies that in Disney films, however, CML will enable children to become active agents in the construction of their own media interpretations, thus providing a safe space to discuss injustices, personal opinions, and hidden themes in Disney films.

Feminist Theory

Films work to create culturally- and historically-produced notions of femininity and masculinity; feminist film theorist Jackie Stacey (1994) argues that cinema is a key source of idealized images and interpretations of men and women. Filmmakers often create distinct and expected dichotomous images of women and men that reinforce the appearance of being “natural” (Hollows, 2000). The film industry’s creation of the dichotomy of men and women to reflect the so-called differences between the two sexes is so common that it results in the naturalization of stereotypes. In turn, the critical audience is responsible for deconstructing these images in order to unveil what they are: ideological constructions created through cinematic elements (Hollows, 2000). Lorber (1994) discusses gender imagery as “the cultural representations of gender and embodiment of gender in symbolic language and artistic productions that reproduce and legitimate gender statuses” (pp. 30-31). Children’s movies, specifically Disney productions, emphasize ideologies such as female passivity and beauty, which are then legitimized as taken-for-granted notions as a result of the repetitive occurrences of gender ideologies. As films throughout decades continue to reproduce such narrow ideologies, they create gendered notions that become natural which, in turn, develop and support the dominant status quo (Baker-Sperry & Grauerholz, 2003).

The notion of the feminine beauty ideal, defined as “the socially constructed notion that physical attractiveness is one of women’s most important assets, and something all women should strive to achieve and maintain” is of particular interest to feminist scholars because under

patriarchal capitalism this is the only legit form of power given to women (Baker-Sperry & Grauerholz, 2003, pp. 711). The feminine beauty ideal emphasizes the attractiveness of women, which then leads to social and psychological rewards for these particular women. The perception is that physically attractive women possess more positive qualities, thus making them more relatable and likeable, as opposed to unattractive women. Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz, (2003) argue that the feminine beauty ideal is often viewed as an oppressive force with which men objectify, devalue, and subordinate women. However, Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz (2003) also argue that some females understand and perceive beauty or becoming beautiful as an empowering force, rather than oppressive. A paradox of the feminine beauty ideal is that “in a patriarchal system, those women who seek to gain power through their attractiveness are often those who are the most dependent on men’s resources” (Baker-Sperry & Grauerholz, 2003, pp. 712). Unquestionably, Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz (2003) claim the group which benefits the most from the feminine beauty ideal is white, heterosexual, middle- and upper-class women; and consequently, this group of women is depicted in the majority of children’s fairy tales. The lead roles in children’s fairy tales are suggested to be products that parallel the feminine beauty ideal, but casting physically attractive characters and, in turn, making them friendly and pure. Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz (2003) concluded from their study that young women in children’s fairy tales are often described as “beautiful,” “pretty,” or “fair” compared to older women or men. More importantly, the authors concluded that media, including children’s media, often convey the message that feminine beauty is the highest ideal, as beauty for women often denotes having morals. The feminine beauty ideal becomes apparent to children through the majority of main roles being filled by attractive characters and through the portrayal of how beauty results in gaining rewards (Baker-Sperry & Grauerholz, 2003). Bazzini, Curtin, Joslin, Regan, and Martz

(2010) further the argument of the feminine beauty ideal in children's media by suggesting the "heroic prince and virtuous princess are attractive, but the wicked witch and evil giant are ugly" (pp. 2688). Myers (2002) further asserts the implications and significance of this ideal by suggesting, "children learn the stereotype quite early; Snow White and Cinderella are beautiful and kind, the witch and the step-sisters are ugly and wicked" (pp. 248). Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz (2003) suggest past and recent Disney animated films often alter retellings of popular fairy tales by changing previous female characters in aspects of "ingenuity, activity, and independence but not physical attractiveness" (pp. 722). It is evident that Disney may be attempting to put a positive spin on outdated female characters by possibly adopting different gendered behaviours; however, the attractiveness of the lead female characters remains untouched.

CML challenges how representations of race, gender, class, and sexuality simultaneously disempower some groups in order to privilege other groups. Feminist theory has created an understanding of the "(mis)representation of the feminine as 'other' in media texts" (Luke, 1994, pp. 32). It is primarily men who create historical and current representations of women, in print and visual texts, thus creating male-authored versions of girls, women, and 'things feminine' (Luke, 1994). Cultural industries have an extensive history of male-produced notions of femininity and females. The male-dominated industries are constructing and promoting stereotypes that conceptualize women primarily either as the "object of male adornment, pursuit and domination, or as mindless domestic drudges, or brain-dead bimbos" (Luke, 1994, pp. 32).

Haskell (1987) argues that films reflect society's accepted definitions of feminine roles in order to reinforce narrow ideals of female stereotypes; stereotypes in film reflect broader power relations between men and women in society. The images of females in films, therefore, emerge

from a hegemonic understanding of femininity and females in society at the time of the film's creation. Conversely, Haskell (1987) argues that by the 1950's, films displayed a "credibility gap" suggesting films became more sexist than society's views. *Cinderella*, a film analyzed in this research, was created in 1950, and may have reflected the "credibility gap." Haskell (1987) raises the important fact that femininity is not "a monolithic and trans historic entity.... instead, different notions of femininity [are] negotiated in films, both between, and within, historical periods" (pp. 35). The historical understanding of media and the historical ideal of femininity is important to incorporate in the discussion of critical media literacy when deconstructing female characters featured in Disney films. It is important to note Disney has a specific social construction of physical beauty, which is portrayed through the attractiveness of the Princesses. However, Disney also constructions a notion of what is considered beautiful and not beautiful through constructing characters in specific ways to associate beauty with goodness and unattractiveness with evil.

Relevance

According to the official Disney website, the Walt Disney Company is a leading and diversified international family entertainment and media enterprise with five business segments: media networks, parks and resorts, studio entertainment, consumer products, and interactive media (The Walt Disney Company, 2012). The Walt Disney Company operates as a global entertainment and news provider, owning television properties such as ABC and ESPN, television stations, networks, as well as a number of radio and publishing businesses. The Walt Disney Parks and Resorts are founders of five world-class vacation destinations, including 11 theme parks and 43 resorts worldwide, with a sixth destination currently being created. There are also four cruise lines with 11 properties and more than 500,000 crew members providing family

vacations around the globe. Walt Disney Studios is responsible for the creation of all Disney films. It is a challenge to quote the exact number of movies created by Disney because of the subsidiary companies that Disney owns, including Touchstone, Miramax, Pixar, and several other large production companies. Disney Consumer Products is the branch of the Corporation that is responsible for producing Disney brand merchandise that includes clothing, toys, home décor, books and magazines, food and beverages, stationery and electronics and even fine art. The latest addition to the Disney Corporation is Disney Interactive, which was founded in 2008 and creates “world class products that pushes the boundaries of technology and imagination” (The Walt Disney Company, 2012).

Altogether, the Walt Disney Corporation is the world’s largest media conglomerate in terms of revenue. The Walt Disney Corporation earned approximately \$40.8 billion US dollars in revenue in 2011, emphasising the power of Disney as a corporate giant. According to data dating back to 1995, Disney is consumed by millions of people. For example: approximately 200 million people watch a Disney film per year, 395 million people watch a Disney-produced television show each week, 212 million people listen to Disney produced music each week, 50 million people visit a Disney Theme park per year, and 42 million people per year make a purchase at a Disney store (Giroux, 1995). With the construction of new parks and the addition of multiple films since the mid-1990s, one can only imagine the increase of visits and purchases that contribute to the Disney Corporation. With such an enormous fan base, it is evident that the Disney Corporation is well-respected and highly valued by families. The enormity of the Disney Corporation and its control over children’s media is what provokes me to further explore how girls can engage with CML to think critically about Disney films.

CML is important in order to deconstruct images that construct knowledge in childhood. Disney produces specific ideologies through its characters, which young children may internalize as norms or specific ideals that must be attained. CML can empower children to actively challenge, question, and critique images found in the media. But while Disney is a multinational corporation whose goal is to make money, its films can also be used as educational tools. Disney characters have the potential to become role models for young children, thereby emphasising the importance for CML. Considering Disney's control over childhood culture, it is imperative to understand the influence it can have on young children.

This research is also relevant as it contributes to the field of Child and Youth Studies in four ways. This study is focused on doing research with children and enabling children to share their opinions, instead of professionals or parents speaking on their behalf. Furthermore, CML is a great strategy that is slowly being implemented into the elementary grades of the Ontario Curriculum. My study adds to this body of research on why CML is crucial to the intellectual lives of children. Child and Youth studies is a growing field and much research has been done on the Disney Corporation; however, most research takes a stand on Disney as being either beneficial or detrimental to children. My research contributes to the field as it shares the opinions, concerns, and voices of young girls, without forcing children to choose whether or not Disney is beneficial or damaging to their lives.

Critical theory seemed to be a perfect fit for the type of research I was interested in doing. From personal experience, I was intrigued by critical theory, specifically critical media literacy, and decided this was the path I was going to take in order to shape my research. I valued the importance of allowing the participants a platform to critically engage in media without being told whether Disney was beneficial or problematic to their development or navigation through

media consumption. Although I was aware that other theories or paradigms would have fit and complemented my research, I began this process with the intention of using critical theory as the basis for my theoretical framework. During the research process, I added some feminist theory into my theoretical framework as it was fitting to my research on girls and the gendered ideologies that would be explored. This caused an interesting intersection, as critical theory and feminist theory seem to hold opposing views in terms of what I was researching. Critical theory views people as dupes of culture, which is rooted in false consciousness. However, by interjecting a feminist angle, which helped introduce consciousness-raising, the combination of these theories allowed for an intricate exploration of gendered ideologies in media. I explored how a false-consciousness is often associated with watching and interpreting media, however my goal was to create consciousness-raising in the young girls so they could become active agents in consuming the media they view daily. By taking this approach to my research, I was incorporating the major components from both critical theory and feminist theory in order to produce a theoretical framework that complemented my research interests.

Chapter Two will cover the existing literature on Disney female characters. The literature review covers a broad approach to Disney literature with regards to Disney female animated characters. The second chapter also includes four main themes that further explore Disney female characters including: a) critiques of the appearance of Disney Princesses, b) gender conformity in Disney female characters, c) powerful female characters in Disney films, and d) heterosexuality in Disney films. This chapter aims to explore topics which will further be used throughout the study as the basis for the questions used in focus groups. The third chapter covers all steps and information with regards to the methodology and theoretical methods used to

conduct my thesis study. The final chapter is a combination of analysis and discussion with a main focus on the opinions and views of young girls' ideas about Disney female characters.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview of the Literature

Significant research exists on Disney's gendered representations of characters but few have focused on the voices of young girls as viewers. My research aimed to open a space for young girls to discuss female characters featured in Disney films. The literature that is covered in this section is the starting point for that discussion as many authors have critiqued several aspects of Disney female characters from various animated films. The first theme that I explored is the appearance of Disney Princesses. Furthermore, this literature review explored the second theme of gender and femininity as it relates to gender conformity for Disney female characters. The third theme discussed is the visible binary opposition between the good and evil female Disney characters. The final theme to be explored is heterosexuality, a norm found within Disney films that is portrayed and exaggerated by the female characters.

These four themes open discussion around femininity and being female. I agree with Giroux (1995) who suggests that Disney movies are most educational and beneficial when children watch and critique the films with an adult. The question schedule used in the focus groups was on the four themes discussed in the literature review. By helping children become aware of these four main themes, I believe that children can use CML in order to become more critical as they view Disney movies. The focus of my research is child centered. This literature review discusses and critiques what the academic literature suggests about Disney female characters. However, I used this information to open discussion with young girls in order to understand their views on the same topics.

Critiques of the Appearance of the Disney Princesses

Skin colour and appearance of female characters featured in Disney films are key areas of analysis in existing literature. This portion will focus on Disney female characters, specifically the Princesses. Disney is notorious for the use of white or very light skin tones for most of the characters in the majority of animated films. The recent addition of non-white skin tones has raised much debate and criticism around the way Disney chooses to represent minority characters.

The Princesses (and Princes) are overwhelmingly white, often with blue eyes and blonde hair. Disney provides a pervasive, unquestioning privileging of whiteness that is intensified by the Disney representation of fairy tale Princesses, which “consistently reinforce an ideology of White supremacy” (Hurley, 2005, pp. 223). The original Princesses, Snow White, Cinderella, Aurora from *Sleeping Beauty* (Geronimi, 1959), Belle, and Ariel, are all well-known for the pureness of their porcelain skin. Princess Fiona is originally an ogre from *Shrek* (Cox, Rabins, Lipman, Adamson, & Jenson, 2001) who is worthy of critique because she eventually assimilates into Disney’s ideal female appearance. The Princess that Fiona becomes aligns her with the typical Princess prototype, featuring white skin, a slim body, and perfect hair. The dramatic transformation alters Fiona from an Ogre to a Princess. Fiona’s mother, also royalty, serves as an example for her daughter, and can be described as “white, straight, blonde, well dressed, refined and mannered, a wife and a mother” (Marshall & Sensoy, 2009, pp. 159). Likewise, Lacroix (2004) notes the Princesses Belle and Ariel are:

constructed with the classic porcelain skin tones and delicate features of earlier Disney heroines like Snow White and Princess Aurora; and continue to be drawn with tiny waists, large breasts, slender wrists, legs, and arms, and still

move with the fluidity and grace of the ballet model used for the older Disney animated films. (pp. 220)

Jasmine is a Princess who possesses a slightly darker tone of skin, yet is still very light compared to other Arabian characters in the film *Aladdin* (Clements et al, 1992). Jasmine is compared to an “exotic Barbie – with her cinched waist, voluptuous bosom, long hair, and flawless features” (Hurley, 2005, pp. 226). Furthermore, Lacroix (2004) notes that Jasmine retains many white features, such as a delicate nose and small mouth, yet differs from Belle and Ariel based on the size and shape of her eyes. Jasmine is supposed to represent an Arabian Princess, however, she follows the physical norms of other white Princesses.

The first and only representations of an African-American Princess did not exist until the fall of 2009—over 70 years after Snow White graced the big screen in 1937 as Disney’s first Princess (Lester, 2010). Tiana, from *The Princess and the Frog* (Del Vecho, Clements, & Musker, 2009), has been noted by many to be the first and only African-American Princess, and unlike other Disney Princesses, she is not a Princess by birth but rather becomes a Princess through marriage to a prince (Lester, 2010). As well, Tiana is critiqued as being a lesser Princess, as she aspires for a career in the service industry while other Princesses remain “happily ever after, in the ivory tower of fairyland bliss profession-less and career-less” (Lester, 2010, pp. 299). *The Princess and the Frog* (Del Vecho, Clements, & Musker, 2009) contains an African-American Princess with darker skin, but she still retains all the features of her fellow white Princesses: straight long hair, delicate skin, and the same unrealistic body shape.

Lee (2009) conducted a qualitative study involving young Korean immigrant girls to discover their interpretation of Disney female characters. The girls watched films that featured the white Princess Ariel, from *The Little Mermaid* (Ashman, Musker, & Clements, 1989), and

the olive-skinned Princess Jasmine from *Aladdin* (1992). The conclusions from the focus groups suggested that the girls felt no personal connection to the Princesses because their skin tones were unlike, and they questioned why the majority of the Princesses were white (Lee, 2009). Aidman (1999) conducted Euro-American and Native American focus groups with young girls. Watching the film *Pocahontas* (Bloodworth, Pentecost, Gabriel, & Goldberg, 1995), the study sought to learn how girls from white and Aboriginal backgrounds viewed an Aboriginal Princess. The girls collectively agreed that Pocahontas is "...not as pretty as the other white Disney Princesses" (Aidman, 1999, pp. 11).

Young girls' viewing of Disney Princesses having white skin was further reiterated in a study conducted by Wohlwend (2009). Wohlwend's (2009) ethnographic study occurred in a kindergarten classroom where students were required to reproduce a Disney plotline in a play. The students in the class specifically chose Princess Aurora to be played by a female student with white skin and blonde hair. The class agreed that this particular student must play Aurora because in order for the audience to make sense of the play, the appearance of the Princess must coincide with the film. The children's understandings suggest the Princess must be white for the audience to understand the plot (Wohlwend, 2009). This interpretation reiterates the internalization of whiteness featured in Disney films.

Disney movies promote narrow images of the female Princess body based heavily on the stereotypical "Barbie" image: white, thin, and large-breasted (Lamb & Brown, 2006). This is not surprising given that in 1994 the Barbie-Disney collaboration took flight in 1994, when Disney and Mattel signed a \$40 million promotion agenda to promote Barbie's 35th birthday at Disney theme parks (Orenstein, 2011). In 2001, Disney and Mattel worked together to promote and create Disney Barbie dolls, which can be purchased worldwide (Orenstein, 2011). The physical

appearance of Barbie has been contested for decades, and Disney has adopted a very similar body image to represent Disney Barbie Dolls (Orenstein, 2011). Belle, Ariel, and Cinderella all represent a typical Princess or Barbie-like caricature. Lamb and Brown (2006) explain that most movie characters possess certain physical traits related to this idealised gender image. Disney is certainly one of the vehicles that utilize this stereotypical ideal. The most common shared characteristic among Belle, Ariel, and Cinderella that relates to Barbie is their abnormal and unrealistically small waists (Lamb & Brown, 2006). This shared characteristic is revealed through tight clothing, which exaggerates and defines the characters' curves. These curves then accentuate the character's large bust, small waist, and big hips (Lamb & Brown, 2006). For example, Belle's dress is tight on her torso and flares at the hips, emphasizing her small waist. Belle's dress also shows off her shoulders and large bust, revealing her cleavage, akin to how Barbie's bust is emphasized. Likewise, Ariel is an underwater, teenage Princess, most often portrayed in a bikini. Ariel's bikini also shows off her small waist, large bust, and cleavage. Similarly, Cinderella's Princess dress places focus on her small waist and cleavage.

Not only do the bodies of all three share similar characteristics, but also all three Princesses are tall, slim, and have similar facial features. Each character possesses large, beautiful, inviting eyes (Lamb & Brown, 2006). The eyes are accented with long, flirty eyelashes, used to seduce male characters. Each character is also portrayed as holding the essence of "natural" beauty, with flawless porcelain skin. These specific characteristics presented by Disney are a social construction of Disney's version of beauty for female characters. Consequently, very subtle make-up is used to emphasize their attractiveness. Belle, Ariel, and Cinderella have long, thick hair. The Princesses also parallel Barbie in that they both possess

large eyes, long eyelashes, and minimal make-up. As we can see, Barbie's influence has dominated in the construction of female characters in Disney films.

Prior to 1999, each Disney Princess was only promoted in relation to a specific film. However, in 1999, Disney created a Princess brand, which amalgamated eight separate Princesses who had never been seen together into one marketing entity (Orenstein, 2011). Many children adore the Disney Princess craze, with the majority and target group being young girls. This line can be purchased through more than 25,000 different products with Disney Princesses on them (Orenstein, 2001). Because of this carefully crafted and marketed Princess phenomenon, I argue that it is important for girls to be aware of critiques of the Princesses, allowing children to become critical consumers of culture. As the above discussion highlights, an abundance of literature suggests Disney Princesses are more than just entertainment for young girls, but reinforce powerful messages about how girls should look.

Gender (Conformity) In Disney Female Characters

A review of several Disney films by Wiserna (2001) revealed that gender images were not current with societal developments in gender equity. Highlighted in this analysis was "the preponderance of domestic work performed by female characters" (Wiserna, 2001). Similarly, Do Rozario (2004) considers the Disney original Princesses, such as Snow White, Cinderella, and Sleeping Beauty, to be very passive beings. The Princesses can be generally defined as "very kind, graceful, good-natured, beautiful, musical, innocent young girls" (Davis, 2006, pp. 101). This trio is grouped together because of their relegation to domestic work, obeying authority, and never questioning what is expected of them. Davis (2006) describes the female characters as simply "reacting to the things happening around them, and when events work out for them in the end, it is thanks to a combination of luck and someone else's (usually a man's) efforts" (pp. 94).

Snow White resides with the evil stepmother Queen, and cooks and cleans for her. Cinderella obediently follows her evil stepmother's demands and caters to her evil wicked stepsisters. Snow White also finds the Dwarfs' cottage and complies with cleaning the house for the dwarfs (Davis, 2006). Aurora is passive as she is dependent on true love's kiss from a prince whom she met once.

England, Descartes, and Collier-Meek (2011) explore the gender roles featured in Disney films by "providing a systematic, quantitative comparison of the main characters' attributes, actions and outcomes in a highly popular grouping of Disney films" (pp. 558). The films included *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (Disney, Cottrell, & Hand, 1937), *Cinderella* (Disney, Geronimi, Jackson, & Luske, 1950), *Sleeping Beauty* (Geronimi, 1959), *The Little Mermaid* (Ashman, Musker, & Clements, 1989), *Beauty and the Beast* (Ashman, Hahn, Tousdale, & Wise, 1991), *Aladdin* (Clements et al, 1992), *Pocahontas* (Bloodworth, Pentecost, Gabriel, & Goldberg, 1995), *Mulan* (Coats, Garber, Halland, Bancroft, & Cook, 1998), and *The Princess and the Frog* (Del Vecho, Clements, & Musker, 2009). Stereotypically feminine traits were counted for every time a Princess appeared embodying these traits. Some traits considered to be feminine include tending to physical appearance, being physically weak, crying, and acting submissive. The list also included showing emotion and acting in a nurturing and sensitive manner. Displaying physical beauty was also featured as a trait that was described as being feminine (England et al., 2011).

The study results showed the five most common attributes portrayed by the Princesses to be: affection, assertiveness, fearfulness, troublesome-ness, and athleticism (England et al., 2011). However, England et al. (2011) note, "assertiveness is a traditionally masculine behaviour...though the majority of the Princesses' assertive behaviours were directed toward

animals rather than people” (pp. 560). This suggests a rather nonthreatening or powerful approach to be assertive; therefore, it is questionable if the females in these films are truly being assertive. The athleticism of the characters was defined as “a specific jump or kick that was large enough to require some athleticism. Running was also coded as athletic” (England et al., 2011, pp. 559). Therefore, the athleticism of the female characters could have been scenes of the Princesses running. Athleticism could also be derived from rescue scenes within the film. The princes often performed the climactic rescue of the movie on their own, except in *Pocahontas* (Bloodworth, Pentecost, Gabriel, & Goldberg, 1995) and *Mulan* (Coats, Garber, Halland, Bancroft, & Cook, 1998), in which the Princess was in a position of power during the final rescue. No Princess, however, did a final rescue without the assistance of the prince (England et al., 2011).

The ratio of feminine characteristics exhibited by the Princesses decreased over time, “with 86% (394 codes) of the Princesses’ behaviour in the early films coded as feminine, reducing to 58% (566) in the middle movies, and 53% (91) in the most current film” (England et al., 2011, pp. 562). These results suggest that as the times changed, female and feminine expectations changed as well. The earlier, more traditional Princesses performed much more feminine traits, correlating with the expectations of females during the 1930s. However, Wiserna (2001) suggests that gender images of females in Disney films have not changed dramatically since the release of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (Cottrell, Hand, & Disney) in 1937.

The literature highlights that female characters follow quite strict feminine expectations and this is an area of discussion that I raised with my participants. The critique of femininity in Disney films is that Disney provides a very limited and narrow idea of femininity, which does

not encourage or explore femininity in alternative ways. It is important for young girls to be aware that gender norms are socially constructed and, in turn, can also be deconstructed and challenged. The exploration of feminine characteristics and behaviours (England et al., 2011) is interesting because it includes all the films that I will be discussing. It is comforting to know that “typically” feminine characteristics displayed by female characters have decreased over time, suggesting that Disney has been impacted by the extreme pressure they have received from activist and feminists groups to offer different visions and versions of femininity. However, the literature suggests that this decrease is only minimal. In my focus groups, I endeavoured to understand if young girls were aware of the gender stereotypes produced by Disney. Specifically, I was interested, as this was not featured in the literature, to see if young girls understood the difference between gender roles and expectations in the films in relation to girls’ own lives and experiences of femininity. I inquired if girls believed that the way the female characters behave is comparable to the expectations they face as females today.

Disney’s Version of Powerful Women are Evil

Disney’s binary colour symbolism often associates white with goodness and black with evil (Hurley, 2005). This binary leaves little space for alternate personalities to be displayed other than “good” and “evil.” In relation to this colour schema, Disney solidifies a dichotomy within femininity through the portrayal of certain female characters. The dichotomy constructs feminine roles as either powerful or passive. Women’s power in Disney films is represented in a negative light, whereas, passivity is associated with the positive. The colour symbolism supports this dichotomy by associating black with power and evil, and white with goodness and passivity. The powerful female characters are portrayed as independent, unattractive, mean, hated, single, and always represented and associated with the colour black; whereas, the passive characters are

associated with the colour white, and are portrayed as dependent, nice, pretty, and often, eventually become coupled or married. The binary is important because of the values attached to each half; for example, the dichotomy between the powerful and passive characters is emphasized through their physical appearance. Ursula, Maleficent, and Cruella de Ville are described as mistresses of all evil, and are, thus, represented as unattractive, loud, bawdy, and inappropriate women (Zarranz, 2007)

Ursula, the wicked sea witch from *The Little Mermaid* (Ashman, Musker, & Clements, 1989) is the quintessential evil-but powerful woman who does not fit the stereotypical body image of the Disney Princesses. Ursula is half human, half octopus, and is portrayed as an obese black and purple squid that “oozes with evil and irony” (Giroux & Pollock, 2010, pp. 101). She is composed of six octopus tentacles and two human arms. Her resemblance to a nonhuman, monster-like creature further dehumanizes her and emphasises her ugliness. Her body’s physical presence emphasizes her dominance in the sea world. This physical presence diminishes the spotlight from other characters, which stresses the evil power she possesses to overcome anyone in her wake. Do Rozario (2004) describes Ursula as a “grotesque parody, who expands, suffocates, and overwhelms as an overweight, ugly woman” (pp. 44). Ursula also has an army of black eels that she uses to spy on and sabotage other characters.

Ursula’s evilness is expressed by her actions. Her manipulative nature negatively affects other characters. Ursula’s desire to dominate the underwater kingdom can only be achieved by destroying King Triton’s rule. She chooses to do so through the manipulation of his daughter, Ariel. Ursula takes advantage of Ariel’s desire to be a human, and Ariel exchanges her voice for 3 days of human life. Ursula’s manipulation and disregard for others displays her selfish actions, reinforcing her unattractive and evil character. Through Ursula, Disney constructs a deeply

damaging view of female power. Ursula can be regarded as a powerful woman in a Disney film; however, she uses her power for evil, and not for good. The depiction of powerful females is, thus, associated with evil, suggesting that power and kindness/beauty are mutually exclusive in women (Do Rosario, 2004).

Maleficent, from *Sleeping Beauty* (Geronimi, 1959), is one of the darkest and most intense characters ever produced by Disney (Hurley, 2005). Her evil character is reinforced through her gloomy, unsightly appearance. She is a tall, thin, pale-green skinned woman with yellow eyes. Her facial characteristics have sharp definition. She is dressed in an oversized, black, and purple robe, which hides her true body shape. Disney uses these specific traits to emphasize their socially constructed idea of an unattractive female character through Maleficent's features and characteristics. Disney is involved in producing a mean female character who is physically unappealing, while Disney simultaneously is producing a notion of what unattractiveness is. Maleficent is accented with a horned headdress, which symbolises her dark, evil magic. Her wickedness is further heightened by her ability to shape-shift. Shape-shifting changes her physical presence from a human being to an animal so her victims are unaware of her presence (Hurley, 2005). By doing so, Maleficent is displaying extreme power, which is only used for selfish and evil ends.

Disney has decided to repeatedly demonstrate female power in a negative and limited view. The evil characters are arguably the most powerful female characters in the films; however, this representation of power is controversial, as they are purely evil. Disney lacks a positive powerful female character for young girls to observe. Discussion around what it means to be a powerful woman took place in my focus groups. I endeavoured to learn how young girls

perceived these powerful women and how their representation as evil and ugly factor into their perceptions.

Heterosexuality

Disney places heterosexual relationships at the centre of all its animated films. England et al. (2011) suggest that although the Princesses may differ in terms of skin colour and ethnicity, one thing remains the same: they are all “happy homemakers looking for a man” (pp. 570). It is suggested that the Princesses live an empty life until a man with whom they fall in love appears. For example, Snow White patiently awaits her prince to take her away to his castle, thus suggesting Snow White is not an active agent in her own life. Ariel leaves her life under the sea as a mermaid to pursue the handsome human prince Eric. Giroux and Pollock (2010) note that Ariel’s maturity and identity “are limited to her feminine attractability and embodied by heterosexual marriage” (pp. 105). Ariel gives up her singing voice to the evil Ursula in exchange for legs in order to leave her home to be with a man. Cinderella embodies the love at first sight stereotype and falls in love with the prince after spending one evening together. Mulan chooses to serve her patriarchal society in the Imperial Army rather than pursue her own ambitions (Do Rozario, 2004). Thus, Mulan is willingly putting herself in harm’s way to benefit her father, setting aside her own dreams and personal safety (Davis, 2006). Although Mulan transgresses the stereotypical passive femininity, she is not considered an original Princess.

The documentary, *Mickey Mouse Monopoly* (Sun & Picker, 2001), criticizes Jasmine’s use of sexuality, as she becomes a seductress to distract the person who is after prince Aladdin. Jasmine chooses to offer her body to Jafar, the male antagonist, to protect Aladdin, the man who she is trying to impress. Jasmine’s life is described as “almost completely defined by men, and in the end, her happiness is ensured by Aladdin, who is finally given permission to marry her”

(Giroux & Pollock, 2010, pp. 105). Furthermore, Belle's relationship with the Beast is criticized, as

the whole thrust of the story is that she returns to him, that she socializes him, that she excuses him; she reinterprets his rage and his abuse as temper, she reinterprets his personality as tender and vulnerable, and then she falls in love with him. (Sun & Picker, 2002)

In the end, Belle becomes “another woman whose life is valued for how she patiently solves a man's problems—and withstands emotional and physical abuse along the way” (Giroux & Pollock, 2010, pp. 106). Similar to Mulan, Belle is willing to sacrifice her own safety, and willingly trades her own freedom to the Beast for her father's freedom (Davis, 2006). In fact, Disney's animated films are dominated by heterosexuality, which is often reproduced through relationships between the main characters. It is important to note that the powerful yet evil female characters are always single, opposed to the Princesses who end up married. It seems the message being portrayed is the females are granted either power or a relationship, never both. Deviation from heterosexuality does not exist in Disney films.

The existing literature analyzing Disney female characters is extensive. Various authors have explored several topics, especially the dominance of whiteness perpetuated through female characters. Furthermore, the female characters, specifically the Princesses are notorious for possessing slim unrealistic bodies. Gender conformity is a dominant theme in the literature as the Disney female characters rarely challenge hegemonic femininity. The females who embody the most power in Disney films are often unattractive and considered the villainesses, associating power with evilness. Lastly, the literature explores the dominance of heterosexuality displayed by the female characters.

My thesis adds to the existing literature that I have explored in this chapter, yet will focus more specifically on what the young girls have to say about Disney. My goal in this research is to share young girls' opinions and critical thoughts on Disney female characters. The emphasis on young girls' voices in relation to Disney films is very limited in the literature, and my study redresses this large oversight.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Why Qualitative Research?

Qualitative research methods enable researchers to understand human beings and their social and cultural lives. Toloie-Eshlanghy, Chitsaz, Karimian, and Charkhchi (2011) argue the main goal of qualitative research is to understand phenomena from the view of the participants, an aim that is regularly neglected through the quantification of data. Szyjka (2012) notes two principles of qualitative research: “a predisposition that reality is socially constructed and that the variables in a situation are highly complex, interwoven, and difficult to measure” (pp. 111). Denzin and Lincoln (2000) suggest that qualitative data go beyond surface explanation revealing an in-depth understanding—one that may be difficult to explore with quantitative methods alone. Qualitative research thus places an individual’s personal experience at the center of a study, offering meaningful context and detailed analyses of the qualities of human existence (Szyjka, 2012).

A main aspect that was appealing to me when collecting qualitative data was the highly interactive and open-ended process of research (Szyjka, 2012). The focus of my research was to provide a space for young girls to share their opinions and make their voices heard, all of which was possible through qualitative research. I was sure to make the participants’ voices heard, as qualitative research allows the researcher to be directly involved in a personal way (Szyjka, 2012). Given that I believe in the importance of doing research and collaborating with children, qualitative methods made the most sense for my study. Through the use of qualitative research, I provided a platform for young girls to share their ideas in a manner that neither limited discussion nor precluded open-ended questions.

Feminist Research

Doucet and Mauthner (2006) argue that it is difficult to define a singular feminist research methodology; however, feminist research supports common characteristics and goals. First, feminist research is done with women, *for* women (Doucet & Mauthner, 2006). Second, feminist research engages with methodologies that challenge mainstream frameworks such as positivist, quantitative methods. And third, feminist research engages with topics that are concerned with social change and social justice. Two well-established features of feminist research are power and reflexivity, which Doucet and Mauthner (2006) argue are most critical within feminist discussions. Feminists researchers aim to consider how power influences knowledge production and the construction processes of knowledge (Doucet & Mauthner, 2006). Furthermore, a feminist approach to power takes a reflexive view on power relations between the researcher and participant, with the goal of actively endeavoring to remove power imbalances between the two. Denzin (1997) refers to reflexivity as the ways in which “our subjectivity becomes entangled in the lives of others” (pp. 27). In order to be reflexive, most feminist researchers reflect on and acknowledge their personal locations and roles in analyzing data. To do so, the researcher must recognize themselves as part of the research process, as the social location of the researcher plays a role in influencing how the data are collected, analyzed, and represented.

Cook and Fonow (1986) offer five epistemological principles for feminist methodology, which relate to my own research practice. The first principle is that the research addresses women and gender as the focus of the analysis; second, the research is concerned with conscious raising (CR) and, therefore, takes a social justice approach; third, the researcher values the knowledge held by the participant and views him or her as an expert; fourth, the researcher is

concerned with the ethical production of research, especially in relation to the rights of the participants; and lastly, the research is intended to empower women, thereby changing power relations in society (pp. 5).

My research reflects these feminist principles. My research supported young girls' voices in an academic world where children are often silenced or ignored. My methodology allowed a space that encourages children to share their ideas and opinions in a respectful environment. I also believe that children are experts in their own lives, and that assertion supports my intention to share the voices of young girls and their views on Disney animated films. I support that children are able to share their personal ideas about Disney animated films, and feel that other areas of research lack this crucial element. Instead, much research is done from an adult or professional point of view, but children are rarely considered as a reliable source of information. In this thesis, I share what the young female participants could contribute to the existing literature of critiques of Disney animated films with a particular focus on female characters.

Why Focus Groups?

Focus groups are a type of qualitative research method that is defined as a group interview (Esterberg, 2001). Although there is a wide range of sizes depending on the type of research and researcher preferences, the average number of participants in focus groups ranges from 5-10 (Boateng, 2012; Breen, 2006; Toloie-Eshlaghy et al., 2011). Focus groups are frequently used in feminist research and often have CR as an explicit goal (Sarantakos, 2004).

Focus groups provide an opportunity for researchers to collect data from several people at once through a conversation between and among the participants. The benefits of using this method include collecting data from a group of people all at once, comfort for the participants, who may feel a power differential when interviewed one-on-one by an adult researcher, and the

possibility that participants can build on each other's answers, thus generating richer data (Boateng, 2012). Some suggest focus groups in order to promote and use social interaction to gather data (Boateng, 2012). Breen (2006) discusses several advantages to using focus groups, including the idea that attitudes and opinions are formed in a social environment, thus raising deep understandings and new insights of the phenomenon under investigation. Furthermore, feminist research uses group discussions to work "towards breaking down taken-for-granted concepts and rebuilding them into new entities" (Sarantakos, 2004, pp. 63).

It was important for me to understand, however, the possible downfalls and barriers that may arise when conducting focus groups. Focus groups are susceptible to "groupthink." Boateng (2012) defines groupthink as a psychologically observable fact that occurs within group settings, and occurs when "the desire for harmony in a decision-making group overshadows a pragmatic appraisal of alternative" (pp. 55). Groupthink occurs when participants try to minimize conflict and difference by agreeing with others in order to "get along." This strategy can create a loss of individual opinions, thus homogenizing data and limiting what is heard in a focus group setting. It was important that I be aware and conscious of such issues to avoid groupthink as much as possible. I began the focus group by explaining groupthink in order to encourage participants to retain and share their honest thoughts and individual opinions. I encouraged and promoted individuality in terms of sharing opinions with the participants before and during each focus group.

A main factor in my desire to utilize focus groups was to shift the power imbalance between the participants and myself. Rebecca Raby (2010) discusses the benefits of focus groups with younger children as the power struggle can be minimized due to the dynamics of group discussion. Focus groups revolve around group discussion, thus allowing the participants, in this

case children, to feel more confident and less nervous in relation to the adult researcher, as the focus is placed on the children instead of the facilitator. Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2004) suggest power imbalances diminish because the participants will interact more with each other than the facilitator, and, therefore, the views of the participants become dominant rather than those of the researcher.

Methods

Recruitment

I recruited participants via word of mouth through the Brock University community. “Snowball sampling” was used. Snowball sampling occurs when researchers identify individuals who have the characteristics which they are interested in, and then engage these people as recruiters in order to identify or connect with those who qualify as participants (Cohen et al., 2004). Two recruitment forms were administered to those willing to aid me in finding potential participants. The first recruitment letter was administered to adults with the intention that they would help in finding participants. Attached to the first recruitment form was the second recruitment letter, which was passed on to the parents of young girls. My intention was that people would pass these forms on to friends or family members with young girls who may be willing to participate in my research study. Both forms had my personal contact information, and provided a brief overview of my research project. Furthermore, an email was sent out to all the faculty and staff of the Child and Youth Department at Brock University with the recruitment forms attached in order to begin snowball sampling.

This research study was open to all girls between the ages of 7 and 11 who were self-declared fans of Disney. I recruited four girls between the ages of 7 and 11. My goal was to include girls from as many different cultural, racial, and class backgrounds as possible in order to

enrich the data and provide multiple points of view. I understood diversity was important to gain multiple understandings from various viewpoints; however, due to the limited responses received, my sample was homogenous and consisted of four white girls from the St. Catharines and Hamilton areas. The four participants were insightful young girls who had much information to offer about Disney. I explained to each girl that a pseudonym would be used to keep their identity hidden, and the participants were then given their choice of pseudonym. A questionnaire for each participant was administered in order to gain an understanding of extracurricular activities that may provide insight into their personal likes that can be reflected in their understandings of Disney. Kara, Brittney, Cayley, and Jade were the chosen names by the participants. The extracurricular activities they listed included being involved in sports, dancing, reading, and spending time with friends and family. The participants were shy at the beginning of the first focus group session, but became very relaxed and friendly with each other towards the end. This made the second focus group more relaxed; the participants were excited to see each other again and were familiar with each other and me.

The same respondents participated in two separate focus groups. The participants were encouraged to provide answers and opinions to critical, thought provoking questions, and were encouraged to ask their own questions as well. Each focus group lasted 60 minutes. The focus groups had semistructured question guides that were used to begin the discussion. A semistructured approach fit my study as it enabled a discussion that made room for the participants' interests, while still offering guidance in the form of specific questions.

Procedure

Due to the nature of the study, the parents of interested participants contacted me through email in order to discuss their daughters' possible participation in research. The parents were

provided with an information package, which included a letter of invitation, informed consent for the parents, assent form for the child, and a brief questionnaire. The parents and children were instructed to read and complete the information package together and told to bring all forms to the first focus group meeting. Once I received confirmation from four parents whose children also agreed, another email was administered to inform all participants of a location and time. Both focus groups took place in the Meeting Room at Brock University in the Child and Youth department, and the parents were instructed to remain within the department in case any participants chose to withdraw.

After collecting all necessary forms (parental consent, child's assent, and questionnaire) the girls were brought into the meeting room. We began with some icebreaker activities that allowed the participants and myself to get to know each other in order to establish a comfortable atmosphere and to build rapport. I encouraged the participants to lead their own icebreakers, which allowed them to have a lead role in an activity to reduce any tension, nervousness, or perceived power imbalance. Following the icebreakers, the participants and I sat in a circle on the floor. I began a PowerPoint presentation with an introduction slide that provided general information about myself that explained my social context as a researcher, student, and fellow Disney fan. My presentation also discussed the reasons for the focus group and explained that I was interested in finding out what young girls had to say about Disney. A brief explanation of CML was then offered to the participants. The PowerPoint also included some general focus group guidelines, which I established prior to the focus group. These rules included: showing respect for each other's answers, addressing the issue of groupthink and the importance of individuality, the protocol for withdrawal, and the option to pass on answering any questions. I then opened the discussion to allow the participants to create a few more rules in order for the

focus group to run smoothly, which again shared power with the participants. Once the rules were established, issues of confidentiality were addressed. The participants were reminded that they were being video and audio taped for the purposes of transcribing. I used child-friendly language to convey the importance of confidentiality and made sure all the participants understood what the term meant by using the analogy of a secret agent and that we must keep our answers confidential. Before beginning the focus group, all participants signed a group confidentiality form.

The first focus group allowed for a general discussion of Disney and displayed the participants' interest and broad opinions of Disney films. The first focus group was intended for me to gain a basic understanding of the child's position on Disney by exploring such topics as: favourite movie, favourite character, and any other stories the participants wanted to share. Some example questions included: Why do you like Disney? Is Disney educational or only entertainment and why? The questions moved into a more specific focus of female Disney characters with questions such as: Does anyone have a favourite female Disney character? Why is that particular character your favourite? (See Appendix A). This focus group was intended to set the foundation that would lead to more specific questions of female characters in the follow-up focus group. The first focus group was intended to explore how much understanding the participants showed in relation to female Disney characters. Questions were also asked that might provide an understanding of the participants' engagement with critically analyzing media through an inquisitive approach. Questions to encourage critical thinking included: Who creates the Disney movies? If you could change one thing about the Princesses, what would you change? The participants also discussed which films they preferred to watch in the second focus group,

which allowed them to have a voice in the research process as these films were selected for critical analysis.

The second focus group consisted of watching clips from Disney films, followed by asking the participants questions that opened up critical discussion of female characters. Clips from three films were showed, including: *The Little Mermaid* (Ashman, Musker, & Clements, 1989), *Cinderella* (Disney, Geronimi, Jackson, & Luske, 1950), and *The Princess and the Frog* (Del Vecho, Clements, & Musker, 2009). There were two clips shown from *The Princess and the Frog* (Del Vecho, Clements, & Musker, 2009), and one clip each from the other two films. The participants were reminded to pay attention to details of each clip and the participants were allowed to watch a clip more than once if requested.

The first film clip that was shown was from the film *Cinderella* (Disney, Geronimi, Jackson, & Luske, 1950). The clip included the part when Cinderella's stepsisters are about to leave for the ball to meet the prince. Cinderella's animal friends had just collected scrap material from the stepsisters to sew a new dress for Cinderella to wear so she also has a chance to go to the ball. As Cinderella walks down the stairs in her new gown, her stepsisters realize Cinderella's dress is made up of their belongings. The stepsisters proceed to rip and tear Cinderella's dress until it is completely spoiled and she can no longer attend the ball. The stepmother is present for the whole scene, which ends with Cinderella running up the stairs to her room crying, while the stepsisters continue on their way to the ball. This clip was chosen was to raise discussion on behalf of the stepsisters treatment of Cinderella. This clip also included the emphasis on feminine beauty and physical attractiveness in order to impress the Prince at the ball, which could be easily discussed in the focus groups.

The second film clip was from the movie *The Little Mermaid* (Ashman, Musker, & Clements, 1989), with an emphasis on Ursula, the evil sea witch. The scene begins with Ursula explaining the potions she has used and the people she has cast spells on in the past, who are all now trapped and under Ursula's control. Ursula explains to Ariel that in order for Ariel to be granted her wish to have feet, she must give up her voice to Ursula. The only way for Ariel to get her voice back is that if she shares a true love kiss with the Prince above the sea. If the kiss does not happen, then Ursula makes it clear that she will have control of Ariel for eternity, and she will become Ursula's minion. The clip ends with Ariel being granted feet. *The Little Mermaid* (Ashman, Musker, & Clements, 1989) clip was chosen specifically because of the overwhelming presence of Ursula and her evil ways.

The third clip from *The Princess and the Frog* (Del Vecho, Clements, & Musker, 2009) features Tiana and her mother in an old abandoned mansion as Tiana is cleaning the dust and dirt from the untouched home. Tiana's mother expresses her dream for Tiana to marry a handsome prince and grace her with some grandchildren. This scene portrays Tiana's disregard for marriage to a prince and instead focuses on her desire to operate her own restaurant, which is shown through an imagined musical sequence. This first clip from *The Princess and the Frog* (Del Vecho, Clements, & Musker, 2009) was chosen to raise discussion around Tiana's dream to own her restaurant, as this deviates her away from the other Princesses.

The last clip, also from *The Princess and the Frog* (Del Vecho, Clements, & Musker, 2009) is the final scene in the film. Tiana is an average girl living in New Orleans, until she comes across a talking frog that claims to be Prince Naveen. The frog convinces Tiana that if she kisses him he will turn into the human form of a prince. Tiana chooses to kiss him, and instead, she is also turned into a frog, and the movie then follows the story of Tiana and prince Naveen as

frogs. The final scene, and clip used in the second focus group, is the ceremony of Prince Naveen and Tiana being wedded as frogs. At the ceremony when the two frogs kiss, they are magically turned into humans and continue the celebration, with family, friends, and animal friends. The finale of the scene shows Naveen helping Tiana fix up her dream restaurant and eventually open “Tiana’s Palace,” which she runs and operates with the help of the prince. I chose this clip to be able to discuss the romantic relationship between Tiana and Naveen. I thought it would be an interesting choice and they were frogs and ended up married. In addition, this clip fulfilled Tiana’s dream of owning her own restaurant, and I believed the discussion as to how she gained this restaurant would be an interesting topic with the participants.

A semistructured question guide was followed in order to create open discussion with the participants following each film clip. The participants were asked to voice their opinions on the female characters featured in each clip and provide insight on topics that included the Princesses’ appearance, relationships, and powerful women (See Appendix B). After discussion of each film clip, wrap-up questions were asked in order to collect an overall understanding and connect all the clips together. This wrap-up also provided a chance for the participants to share any final thoughts that they may not have had the chance to voice throughout the focus group.

Data Analysis

After both focus groups were completed, I transcribed the data. I manually coded the transcribed data by attributing different colours to specific themes. Some themes that I expected to come across were girls’ references to Princesses as favourite characters, the beauty aspect of female characters, body image and physical appearance, and Disney as a form of entertainment. From a CML perspective, I was interested to see if the participants were able to see past the literal images provided by Disney. Furthermore, I was looking to see if the participants

challenged or questioned images or behaviours of the female characters. Although there is limited research that provides specific examples of children exhibiting critical thinking, Facione (2011) provided six core critical thinking skills. The six skills are interpretation, explanation, analysis, inference, evaluation, and self-regulation (Facione, 2011). Children who exhibit these skills are able to decode symbolism, examine ideas, identify arguments, draw conclusions using inductive or deductive reasoning, assess quality of arguments, justify procedures or arguments and self-correct (Facione, 2011). Children exhibit critical thinking when they become confident in their reasoning and become highly inquisitive (Facione, 2011). Through open-mindedness and analytical questions, I was able to encourage the participants to partake in CML and critical thinking with regards to Disney.

Since I was interpreting the focus group discussions, I was careful during this analysis stage. An issue that could arise is the misinterpretation of the young girls' opinions or statements. I asked follow-up questions and asked for further explanation to assure I had a clear understanding of the girls' interpretations of the texts. Furthermore, there was the possibility that my interpretation of the participants' answers was not what the girls meant. This is true of any research, and to minimize this misinterpretation as much as possible, I was sure to listen carefully and ask follow-up questions in order to honour what the participants were saying. I had the participants elaborate as much as possible to avoid misinterpretation and gain a strong understanding of their opinions. Analysis of qualitative research is subjective and I was conscious of my own personal biases. I also paid attention to body language and tone of voice in the video recordings as this can play an important role in the emphasis and meaning of what is being said. I was not looking for one specific answer, or a correct answer; rather, I was aiming for an open discussion that encouraged critical thinking. With these aspects in mind, I

acknowledged that the participants all have different experiences, and, in turn, will relate to Disney in nonuniform ways. I aimed to gain multiple views on Disney in order to share the voices of young girls and to add to the existing literature on Disney through the use of children's opinions.

Linking Qualitative Research, Focus Groups, and CML

A clear link between qualitative research and focus groups exists, which suitably links with critical media literacy (CML). The aim of critical media literacy is to ask questions and encourage the participants to ask questions. CML is made up of five core concepts, which are supplemented with five core questions: 1. Who created this message? 2. What techniques are used to attract my attention? 3. How might different people understand this message differently? 4. What lifestyles, values, and points of view are represented in or omitted from this message? 5. Why was this message sent? (Share & Thoman, 2007, pp. 11). These questions are the foundation of CML and are the basis of starting any conversation revolving around media. Given the nature of CML as a question-based perspective, focus groups are an appropriate setting to begin a discussion on female Disney characters. It is through focus groups that I was able to provide a space for girls to answer and ask questions in a safe environment. The use of focus groups allowed the core concepts of CML to be explored through discussion.

Focus groups were also chosen as they provided an appropriate space to discuss Disney films and CML strategies because of the group atmosphere. The CML techniques that were used in my research focused on an inquiry-based strategy. Scheibe and Rogow (2012) provide a detailed outline, which explains how to lead an effective inquiry-based media decoding session. Scheibe and Rogow (2012) outline the importance of setting educational goals and teaching the appropriate language and vocabulary in a flexible manner so that all bases are covered while

simultaneously leaving space for unplanned exploration. The first focus group was used to expose the participants to CML goals and language in preparation for the second focus group.

Scheibe and Rogow (2012) outline seven main steps to conducting an effective media analysis from an inquiry-based approach. The first step requires setting up the decoding by giving the context for analysis before any decoding takes place. The authors note the importance of giving students a heads-up about what to look for or a sense of what the follow-up discussion will be prior to showing any film clips. The second focus group included this technique as I provided a brief synopsis of what happened prior to the scene and also what was about to happen in the clip. I reminded the participants to pay close attention to detail, what the characters looked like, what they said, and the behaviour they performed. The second step is to begin decoding with a question. It is important to begin with general comprehension questions coupled with the key questions aforementioned. The question schedule in the focus group began with very general questions, which eventually became more specific throughout the discussion. The third step is to follow up on a participant's answer with probes by asking questions, such as "Where do you see that or what makes you say that?" I considered this step to be one of the most important, as I was always asking follow-up questions to stimulate the participants to support their original thoughts. The fourth step is to continue probing when appropriate, especially to get at key content points and perspectives by exploring expansions, interpretations, clarifications, restatements, and affirmations. The fifth step is encouraging others to participate in discussion by incorporating their opinions. I made a conscious effort to provide each participant with a chance to answer each question to make sure everyone had an equal chance to share their opinions. The sixth step includes tailoring questions to fit the document and your own goals and needs. This step is achieved by the specific focus group questions in order to explore relevant topics. The last step is

paying attention to the ways in which questions are asked for a successful inquiry-based media analysis.

A goal of CML is to deconstruct media beyond its surface level meanings. Although this may be challenging for a younger group of children to do on their own, through CML strategies (such as the questions above), children can learn how questioning media can lead to critical thinking about representations. As I have noted, it was my main goal to provide young girls with a space to voice their own opinions, and qualitative research is a great means to achieve this goal.

This research is important as it provides a voice to a population rarely heard from: young girls. Much research is done *on* children instead of *with* children, and I feel my research provided a chance for young girls to voice their opinions in a positive atmosphere, where their opinions were highly valued and respected. Randall (2012) revisited Mandell's (1988) least-adult role, which addresses the importance of valuing the child's social position when doing research with children. There are three core concepts that are addressed when doing research with children, including minimizing the social difference and power imbalance between adults and children, valuing children's social worlds as being equally important as adults' social worlds, and finding a shared meaning with children through social activities (Randall, 2012). However, I believe it is crucial to note that although I actively worked to reduce my power to the least-adult role, it was important for me to remember that I was still an adult and would be seen as an adult figure by the participants. Nevertheless, being conscious of this fact is part of doing research with children. With my background in Child and Youth studies, supported by my strong belief in making space for children's opinions, I believe my research adopted these core concepts. I believe my research was a beneficial experience for the participants as they were provided with an opportunity to

gain exposure to CML and ways of challenging media images that will alleviate pressures from media bombardment.

Ethical Dilemmas: Focus Groups with Young Girls

Ethics is a main concern in the research process; I was very cautious to avoid pushing biased or existing views of Disney female characters on the participants, and instead encouraged young girls to navigate media texts for themselves. Furthermore, ethical clearance was granted from Brock University in order to commence the research process, and to minimize any risk for the participants and maximize the benefits.

Some ethical issues may arise when working with young girls in a focus group setting. Vaughn, Schumm, and Sinagub (1996) discuss the issue of how it may be unwise to use a group of younger participants that know each other as they may be less capable of keeping confidentiality; they may interact with shared mandatory environments, such as school. Ethical concerns regarding breach of confidentiality were explained to the children in detail at the beginning of the first focus group. The participants were also reminded about confidentiality prior to beginning the second focus group. Furthermore, in the parental consent form and letter of invitation, parents were informed and aware of the possibility of this issue arising.

I was conscious of discussion around sensitive topics such as body weight and issues with physical appearances. The potential for the participants to provide personal examples was considered, since we were deconstructing Disney character, especially surrounding the Princesses. There was the potential for the girls to provide personal examples or understandings of body issues from their point of view, which may raise sensitive feelings; however, this was not an issue that was openly discussed in either focus group. Furthermore, similarly sensitive

topics could have arisen, such as discussions around race and ethnicity or white dominance, given that the majority of the characters have white skin.

There was also the potential for feelings of insecurity or inadequacy to arise due to the dynamics of focus groups. Since focus groups are based on group discussion, there was a possibility for some girls to feel as if other participants were dominating the conversation, or experience a sense of insecurity based on the opinions of the other girls. I tried to diminish this issue by ensuring each participant they had a chance to offer their ideas for each question, and opened space for any comments throughout each focus group. Moreover, there was a risk of bullying because of the group setting, and some girls may feel uncertain and timid if some members of the group are more outspoken than others. To the best of my knowledge, this did not occur as none of the participants knew each other. The group atmosphere was very positive and friendly and the participants seemed to get along quite well which contributed to rich data.

CHAPTER FOUR: DATA ANALYSIS

Mean and Ugly: Powerful Female Disney Characters

“I think they made Ursula look like that because she’s mean, and usually mean people look bad.”

--Kara (age 7)

The goal of this research was to open a discussion around ideologies that can be noted in Disney animated films, especially with regards to female characters. Research explored powerful female characters in Disney films, which not-coincidentally are the notoriously evil characters. Female power in Disney is represented in a negative light, and I was interested to see if young girls grasped this ideology. During the first focus group, the participants did not focus much attention on power exerted by female characters. However, in the second focus group, a main character that was focused on for this section was Ursula from *The Little Mermaid* (Ashman, Musker, & Clements, 1989).

Ursula’s physical presence diminishes the spotlight from other characters as her large body and negative actions dominate throughout the film. It is interesting to note that one of the participants was elaborating on her favourite character, Ariel, which led her into a discussion about the “bad person” in *The Little Mermaid* (Ashman, Musker, & Clements, 1989). It is fascinating that the participants extended the discussion from Ariel as a favourite character to Ursula, who was disliked. This example creates a link to how Ursula is a dominating character in the film. At the first mention of Ursula, she was referred to by Brittney as “this mean bad person in [The Little Mermaid].” Upon the mention of Ursula, an overwhelmingly uniform response from all participants was that she was “mean and evil.” The participants repeatedly referred to Ursula as “that mean person” or the “evil person” instead of using her character’s name throughout the discussion in the first focus group. It is also interesting to note the

participants' use of gender-neutral references, such as using the word "person" instead of evil woman. Because the first focus group was based solely on discussion with no clips to analyze the conversation, it was very brief and not overly critical. The participants gave simple reasons for disliking Ursula, which connected directly to the plot of the film—mainly Ursula's power to take away Ariel's voice. I was surprised that the participants did not elaborate or delve deeper into reasons for disliking Ursula because of her evil ways in the film.

Another participant, Jade, veered away from Ursula and shared that a character that she did not like in Disney films was "the evil person in Snow White, because she gave Snow White the poison apple." Kara interjected and added that it was the "Evil Queen" who was trying to poison Snow White, and that she was disguised as "old and ugly." Although in the first focus group the participants did not connect the evil characters to the construction of powerful women, there was an overwhelming uniformity in their responses: they were mean and ugly, and this was the main reason for disliking them. I recognized that the participants picked up on the unattractiveness of specific characters and connected it to these characters being disliked, and I used this recognition as a stepping stone to become more critical for the second focus group.

The second focus group produced deeper critical discussion about Ursula specifically as well as the stepsisters and stepmother from *Cinderella* (Disney, Geronimi, Jackson, & Luske, 1950). The participants viewed clips of the characters and then based their discussion on the scenes that they viewed, which created a deeper discussion and allowed for more critical thinking because the images were so fresh in their minds. I realized that there were clearly much deeper and stronger connections in the second focus group and I attributed this to the film clips and the questions and probes I provided after each clip.

Participants first watched a clip from *Cinderella* (Disney, Geronimi, Jackson, & Luske, 1950). The clip centered on Cinderella's stepsisters spoiling Cinderella's dress and destroying her outfit so that Cinderella could not attend the ball. The participants simply referred to the stepsisters as "mean" for spoiling Cinderella's dress, but did not go into more detail. I tried to probe further in order to discuss the scene in terms of how the sisters treated Cinderella, but the descriptor word remained "mean." I suggested that the participants try to connect the actions of the stepsisters to something they may have witnessed and an automatic response was given that paralleled the actions to "bullies." The participants were able to recognize the power imbalance between the stepsisters and stepmother, and Cinderella, by paralleling the scene to a victim and a bully. The consensus for this happening was because Cinderella was younger than the stepsisters; therefore, the participants believed the power imbalance was due to a hierarchy, similar to older children bullying younger children. I argue this answer displays critical thinking as the participants were able to connect the relationship between Cinderella and her stepsisters to their own lives and make a connection. This connection shows that the participants were able to make associations that go beyond the film. The bullying discussion raised a conversation surrounding people's actions and how we are all responsible for our own actions. The participants collectively agreed that they would not enjoy being treated the same way Cinderella was, and, in turn, would not feel good about themselves if they treated anyone the same way.

A key component of CML is encouraging children to become critical viewers of media, which is supported by raising ideas that challenge children to begin to ask their own questions. Interestingly, during the second focus group, the participants began to critically assess Ursula's intentions and, in turn, began asking questions that led to a group discussion. For example, when discussing Ursula's plan to take Ariel's voice, Jade raised an interesting question, stating

I don't really get it, when [Ursula] takes away [Ariel's] voice and she gets feet, if [the prince does not fall in love with Ariel] will she get her voice back? If she has to live with Ursula, does she get her voice back?

Cayley answered her question by suggesting that she does not think Ariel would get her voice back because "Ursula's mean and she might not give it back." Therefore, this dialogue between the participants demonstrates critical thinking as the young girls were able to discuss with each other their viewpoints of the possible outcomes that went beyond the plot.

The participants' observations and paralleling the film clip to bullying reiterates Gainer's (2007) understanding that CML in that it allows children to understand immediate images in films while simultaneously reading beyond the screen. In stating that they would feel unhappy to be treated or treat someone similar to the experience in the *Cinderella* (Disney, Geronimi, Jackson, & Luske, 1950) clip, the participants gained an understanding of a power imbalance and, in turn, challenged the media image by disagreeing with it, which is a key component of CML (Kellner & Share, 2007). Kellner and Share (2007) also suggest that CML encourages viewers to utilize personal life experiences to debate dominant narratives, something which the participants were able to do when they disagreed with the actions performed by the "evil characters." Overall, based on the existing literature on powerful female characters in Disney films, I argue that my focus group data suggest that although young girls are able to identify evil characters and describe them as being unattractive, I do not believe young girls grasped the ideology of equating female power with evilness. I do not believe the participants made a clear link between female power and negative characteristics. I do believe that the participants were able to observe female characters as having power and simultaneously describe them as "ugly;"

however, I argue that the participants did not have a comprehensive understanding of Disney's use of unattractive females who simultaneously use power in a negative light.

Love and Marriage: Heterosexuality in Disney Animated Films

“Prince Eric, he likes Ariel because she is nice.”—Jade (8)

A significant theme that emerged from the discussion of the film clips was love and relationships. Discussion of dating, courtship, and marriage was explored; however, all discussion was heavily heteronormative. It seemed natural to the participants that any discussion of love or relationships was only possible between a male and female. There was no veering away from heterosexuality amongst any of the participants during any point of the discussion. As England et al. (2011) suggest, the Princesses in Disney animated films are generally blissful homemakers whose only concern is looking for a man to take their hand in marriage.

The participants had a wealth of information to share about the princes falling in love with the Princesses; however, the prince did all the action of falling in love. An overwhelming response from each participant suggests the Princesses to be rather passive when it comes to falling in love. The participants constantly referred to how the prince “will fall in love with the Princess” instead of the Princess and prince falling in love with each other. For example, I inquired why Cinderella did not want to go to the ball in her ripped clothes after her stepsisters spoiled her dress. Jade answered, because “she wants the prince to like her, and if she goes to the ball, the prince can fall in love with her.” This example insinuated that the beauty of the Princess determined if the prince would fall in love with her or not. The participants essentially were adopting concepts from the feminine beauty ideal, a concept which suggests that a woman's most important asset is her physical attractiveness (Baker-Sperry, & Grauerholz, 2003). The participants explained in detail that it was improper and illogical for Cinderella to attend the ball

in a spoiled dress because the prince would never fall in love with her if she looked ragged, dirty, or unattractive in any way. I inquired why Cinderella's stepsisters were so adamant about going to the ball, and Brittney answered by insisting, "it was so the prince can fall in love with them." After I analyzed the conversations about love, I realized that there was very little discussion about the Princess falling in love with the prince. It caused me to question if exposure to Disney movies causes young girls to understand that it is expected of females to be passive when it comes to love and to wait for a man who will eventually fall in love with them ("Someday my prince will come..."). It was not until post analysis that this realization occurred to me, which leaves room for further exploration on this particular topic.

The participants offered some interesting recommendations for approaches that would result in the prince falling in love with the Princesses. For example, Kara's suggestion as to why Cinderella needed a beautiful ball gown to wear to the ball was that "maybe the prince will like them even more than what they really are." This quote is in relation to Cinderella appearing to be more than just a domestic poor servant and, in turn, Kara suggests that the prince may believe that she is royalty or from the upper class due to her appearance. Some of the participants offered interesting feedback with regards to Ariel's strategy to have the prince fall in love with her. The clip I showed in the focus group included Ursula taking away Ariel's voice. I asked the participants how Ariel can make the prince fall in love with her if she has no way to verbally communicate with Prince Eric. Giroux and Pollock (2010) note that Ariel's maturity and identity "are limited to her feminine attractability and embodied by heterosexual marriage" (pp. 105). The participants furthered this idea, as Cayley suggested that "Ariel [will] just walk by [Prince Eric] and like...look at him and wave." I inquired as to what was meant by this, and Brittney suggested that she meant, "be like Ursula said, use body language." Ursula used a sarcastic and

provocative tone with a seductive body wave to suggest the use of body language in a rather sexual manner. Due to the young age of the participants, I was unsure if they were aware of the connotation of these cues; therefore, I followed this discussion by asking their opinion on what Ursula meant with her actions. Brittney understood Ursula's reference to body language "as possibly maybe like sign language," and Jade followed up by suggesting that Ursula meant that Ariel needed to "depend on what she looks like [and] she can just use her looks, that's what Ursula is trying to tell her." I asked Jade to further explain what she meant by "use her looks" and she clarified: "well like, [Ariel] is really pretty, so if Prince Eric sees her, maybe then he will just start liking her." It is interesting to note that Brittney disagreed with this idea by suggesting that, "[Prince Eric] doesn't really know her, and if he would see her walking on the street or something, he would be like, 'Oh that's a pretty girl, and not really fall in love with her.'" This was the first major contribution to this topic that really challenged the mainstream idea of the Prince just falling in love with the Princess based on her beauty. However, I made sure to reiterate the idea that love is not based on physical appearance as a discussion around this topic seemed to be very much needed and very important for young girls. All the participants were able to relate and effortlessly contribute to the conversation, showing they understand that love goes beyond physical beauty.

The participants viewed the marriage to the prince as a strategy that better the situation of the Princess, echoing the gendered assumption that women rely on men, particularly for money and protection. Upon asking why Cinderella would want to attend the ball again, Jade responded that, "to be a couple with the prince then either they can get money or because then they can be Princesses." Cayley added, "Because maybe he might be rich." Moving forward, we discussed Princess Tiana from *The Princess and the Frog* (Del Vecho, Clements, &

Musker, 2009), and why her mother's dream is for Tiana to get married. Kara responded by suggesting that, "maybe because [the prince] is rich and so then she doesn't have to stay with her mom all the time." Brittney added, "So she could have somebody to go with her, so she doesn't have to be alone. So if she goes somewhere the prince can go with her." The participants' answers really showed that they felt the Princess needed the prince for assistance, protection, and finances. In the wrap-up questions, I asked why the participants believed that the Princesses wanted to meet a prince. The first response I received was from Kara: "To pay for food, drinks, clothes," followed by Brittney, who added, "to show it off and be like superstars." These examples suggest that the Princess needed a prince to rely on for financial support and protection. There was overwhelming response from the participants around the reliance on the prince for monetary reasons.

A specific example in which the participants really narrowed in on a Princess relying on a prince was in the situation of Tiana's restaurant. As stated, Tiana's dream was to open her own restaurant; however, the last clip we watched together featured Tiana marrying prince Naveen, and the two of them reconstructing her desired building and eventually opening her dream restaurant. When I asked the participants how Tiana's dream finally comes true, a uniform response suggested her dream came true only with the prince's help and support because after all, "she got it after she got married" (Kara). The participants were adamant that Tiana's restaurant was opened due to the prince's assistance by "paying for the construction and his ability to fix everything up." I then asked if Tiana did not end up getting married, would she have been able to open the restaurant. The participants collectively agreed that it would not have been possible. Without the prince, the participants were unsure how Tiana would have had enough money because when she got married, "she used the prince's money," and although it

was Tiana's dream, "he helped her build it" (Jade) . It was evident that the participants struggled to believe that Tiana could have achieved her dreams without the prince.

In this thesis, I argue constant exposure to the repeated story line of the Prince and Princess falling in love and getting married has conditioned the participants to assume that a Princess's wish is to find a prince and fall in love, or get married. Not every story ends with the Princess marrying a prince; however, many of the stories follow this plot. For example, the clip we watched featuring Princess Tiana began with Tiana confessing to her mother that her only wish is to one day open and operate her own restaurant. Tiana's mother responds with her wish for her daughter to get married and fall in love with a prince charming. After watching the scene, I asked if anyone recalled how Tiana's dream comes true, and the quickest response I received was from Cayley, who suggested that, "Tiana found a frog and then she kissed it. Then she turned into a frog. Then he made her turn into a frog. Then they wanted to get married so she kissed him and they came back to humans." I followed up by asking again, what was Tiana's dream, and I was answered with an excited, confident, group reply: "To get married!" However, upon requesting that the participants really think about the question again, the correct response of opening a restaurant eventually came forth. It is interesting that after asking twice, the participants were still confident that it was the Princess' "dream to get married." Another interesting point came out after the first question I asked in our first focus group: "What comes to mind when I say the word Disney?" Jade's answer was, "probably all of the different brides." The other participants quickly intervened and suggested that Jade meant the Princesses and not a bride. However, it is interesting to note that her first thought of Disney revolved around marriage, specifically when referring to the Princesses. I have argued that Disney conditions young girls to internalize specific notions, such as the "happily ever after" phenomenon within

the Princess narrative, and I feel the participants in my study supported this notion.

Only a few examples or instances of critical viewing emerged during our discussion of love and marriage and relationships. The main example I found of critical thinking occurred in the first focus group, when the participants discussed liking Tiana the most because her dream was to not get married, but instead to own her own business. The participants really seemed to value the fact that Tiana did not strive to fall in love and this answer was stated several times by almost all the participants. Each participant shared a similar opinion of Tiana, but Jade summed it up by stating that Tiana's story "kind of" ended like the other Princess stories,

like she fell in love, but in the end of the other Disney Princess movies, it ends off just about them falling in love, but in the end of this movie, it was that, but she actually, her dream came true which wasn't meeting a prince but building a restaurant.

Brittney added that Tiana "wanted to keep working and follow her dreams and go further." These examples suggest that the participants were thinking critically about the reasons why they chose Tiana as a favourite character, and those reasons challenged the mainstream plotlines of Disney films. Cayley also showed critical thinking when I asked the participants why they believed the Princesses wanted to meet a prince. She responded with an answer that truly showed she was thinking critically about the plot by stating that, "[Tiana] fell in love with a frog instead of a person, she couldn't even see a person." Cayley was responding to my question on whether or not the Princesses wanted to fall in love, or if it was a societal expectation. She challenged the idea of societal pressures being the root cause of making Princesses fall in love with princes, but suggested that love occurred when they were both frogs; therefore, it must have been based on feelings because there was little physical attractiveness to be judged when both Naveen and Tiana were frogs. Critical thinking was shown when the participants asked questions. When

discussing the monetary gains from marrying the prince, Cayley asked innocently: “But I don’t get it, how did he have money if he was a frog the whole time?” Although this may seem to be a trivial question, it really shows that Cayley is considering questions that go beyond the plot of the film.

Pretty and Nice: Disney Princesses

Disney Princesses elicited the most enthusiasm from participants and discussions around them were explored in depth. The participants had a wealth of information to share about the Princesses and, in turn, this section of analysis will focus on the physical appearance and personalities of the Princesses and the feminine beauty ideal from the viewpoint of the participants.

Each film clip we watched featured Cinderella, Princess Tiana, or Ariel, and the participants spent a large amount of time discussing the physical appearance of each of these Princesses. The participants seemed to care most about physical traits and shared a wealth of information concerning the dresses the Princesses wore. A consistent explanation for liking a specific Princess was due to her “poufy gown.” Whenever I asked the participants to describe a Princess, each participant made a reference to “a poufy gown,” as well as referring to the Princess’s hair. The overall description from each participant about any Princess resulted in the Princess having a beautiful gown and beautiful hair, and an overall description of the Princesses as “pretty.” For example, Belle was described as a favourite Princess because: “I like her hair how it’s curly at the end and then this big poufy yellow dress comes down with all the curly circles around her, and I like how she’s wearing yellow high heels.” (Brittney). Furthermore, Kara added, “I like her dress and how she looks and her style of her hair. I like that it’s curly and dark brown. I like that her dress is like silky and it’s poufy and yellow.” At the end of this

conversation, I requested that the participants share their viewpoints on why they believed so many girls love Disney Princesses. Cayley suggested the Princesses were a popular topic among young girls because “they have their dresses, so poufy, and they have their hair up so nice, and they have these crowns and necklaces and bracelets and these big gloves.” Brittney’s opinion was that it was “because they have gowns, poufy gowns and sparkles all over their gowns and different colours.” Jade added to the topic by adding, “I think girls like Princesses because they have a ton of jewelry and their hair and their dresses.” I encouraged the participants to take these thoughts one step further and provide specific examples to describe the Princesses. Again, all responses were automatically describing the physical appearance of the Princesses; this time descriptions were much more detailed, as requested. Cayley provided great detail: “Some have black hair, brown hair, red hair, and they have poufy dresses and they have...um...Ariel has a tail and sometimes she has feet and a poufy dress, and they have high heels and jewelry.” Kara added to the conversation by suggesting, “they sometimes have earrings, and their gowns are all different colours like yellow, blue, and green.” Brittney added a significant point that I was surprised did not surface prior, by simply stating: “They are all skinny.” The unrealistic body shape of the Disney Princesses is a topic in academic literature that is deeply explored; however, I find it interesting that this was the only mention from the participants of the Princesses’ body image. It is important to note that the participants’ explanations of the Princesses solely referred to Cinderella, Ariel, Jasmine, Belle, and Snow White. I asked if any of the participants did not like the Princesses or if there was anything about a specific Princess that they did not particularly like. The participants spent some time thinking about it, and collaboratively discussed a movie to determine the name of the character they were thinking of: Mulan. Brittney’s reason for disliking Mulan was, “because of the way she dresses. She has different clothes. It is like she is wearing a

blue cloth, a red cloth, and a pink cloth.” Cayley shared similar feelings toward Mulan, and added,

I don’t like her because when you don’t speak the language she’s speaking then you don’t know what she’s saying. And because she has these clothes that are not so poufy as every other Princess. And they are mostly ripped.

Mulan, from the film *Mulan* (Coats, Garber, Halland, Bancroft, & Cook, 1998), is a Disney Princess who disguises herself as a warrior in order to fight for her country and to save her father from death in the Chinese Army, and becomes one of China’s greatest heroes. Mulan plays more of a masculine role compared to the other Princesses, and it is clear that her lack of stereotypical femininity caused the participants to dislike her. Although the participants did not raise the discussion of race, I argue this was not the main contributing factor for the dislike of the character Mulan. I believe that her lack of white skin was not a concern for disliking Mulan, based on the notion of the participants voicing their likeness and favoritism by some towards Princess Tiana, who also possess alternative skin tones opposed to the whiteness of the other Princesses.

It was not until I deliberately requested that the participants discuss the Princesses’ personalities that the discussion veered away from physical appearance. The conversation of Princess personalities was rather interesting from the viewpoint of the young girls. The consensus of Disney Princesses from the participants was that they all “seem nice.” I asked the participants to describe their personalities, and the first response from Jade was that they “are like really, really nice, and they are usually always happy.” Kara added, “most of them are really pretty and they are usually nice.” Cayley suggested that, “they are really nice and usually really happy.” Brittney continued this idea, and suggested, “they’re nice, they’re friendly, and they’re

funny and in a lot of the movies they never really get mad, they are just always happy.” As previously mentioned, Disney uses the Princesses to create a moral and good woman, a concept in which the participants constantly referred to the Princesses as being nice. I used this idea put forth by the participants to encourage them to critically think about the Princesses’ personalities, and, in turn, asked them to connect these ideas to a “real life person” either in the media, at their school, or in their family.

A key component of being a critical viewer of media is being able to go “beyond the screen” and connect the film to personal experiences (Gainer, 2007). I encouraged the participants to try this approach by asking if any of the Princesses could relate to someone in their lives. The participants really enjoyed this task and were willing to share their ideas, which all differed, but were very interesting points of view. Cayley related one of her best friends to Belle because her friend always “wears yellow and has hair like Belle, and she was Belle for Halloween.” Cayley’s answer was straightforward in that she connected physical attributes between a Princess and her friend. I imagined that most of the answers would refer to the physical appearance because it is the most obvious; however, this was not always the case. Kara shared that she saw comparisons between Belle and her mother because “Belle is really nice and so are most of the Princesses, and my mom’s really nice too.” It was great to see Kara thinking beyond physical appearance and comparing the personality of her mother to Princesses. Jade also shared an interesting connection in that she related a friend from her old school to Mulan because her friend “wasn’t overly girly.” I was surprised by this answer because Mulan was rarely considered in the discussions about the Princesses. Jade also exhibited critical thinking because she chose a friend and Princess that did not follow the typical Disney Princesses or the stereotypical femininity portrayed by the most popular Princesses. Another very interesting

answer was from Brittney when she referred to a girl in her class whom she described as “so picky and she thinks she’s this royalty girl and if you do something wrong, and then the teacher tells you that you also did it wrong, this girl is like ‘I told you so!’” Brittney shared her comparison with a lot of attitude and her tone suggested that she was quite angry and/or annoyed; it was clear that Brittney did not like the way her classmate acted and the way she carried herself. This was a particularly interesting conversation to have because prior to this moment, the participants shared no negative aspects toward Disney Princesses. Evidently, there was a disconnect between their romanticized and utopian understanding of Disney Princesses and the way they connected these characters to people in their lives. I then shared this thought with Brittney and suggested that her friend did not sound overly nice; however, we all agreed throughout the focus group that Princesses are nice. Her response to my questioning was, “I know...but some types of Princesses are very picky.” It was fascinating to watch her navigate through these contradictory thoughts when she has previously provided so much positive response in relation to Disney Princesses. This was a useful exercise to do with the participants and each girl provided a great answer that allowed critical thinking to occur in order to make a connection between a fictional character and someone in their lives. Each answer caused the participants to think about the reasoning for the connections between the characters and friends or family, which also furthered them to become more critical. This is an example of the iceberg analogy that was discussed previously in the literature review of CML. The participants were able to make connections that were not obvious by simply watching the film.

The most interesting theme within the Princess discussion that I discovered when doing this research was the young participants’ own development of the feminine beauty ideal. As previously mentioned, the feminine beauty ideal refers to the notion of physical attractiveness

being the most important assets of being a girl or woman (Baker-Sperry & Grauerholz, 2003). The feminine beauty ideal creates the perception that a physically attractive woman possesses positive qualities, which, in turn, makes the women more relatable and likeable. Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz (2003) suggest words, such as “beautiful” and “pretty,” to describe main female characters in children’s fairy tales. A main concept of the feminine beauty ideal instills the notions that more attractive and beautiful characters are granted high importance and, in turn, demonstrates how beauty results in gaining rewards (Baker-Sperry & Grauerholz, 2003). The striking parallels among the participants’ descriptions of the female Princesses in Disney films links directly to the feminine beauty ideal. It is important to note that I did not discuss the feminine beauty ideal in any form with the participants. The answers they provided were simply from conversations raised by asking simple questions to get the conversation started. Words, such as “beautiful” and “pretty” were used repeatedly throughout the focus groups as a way for the participants to describe the Princesses. For example, Kara stated, “the Princesses are really pretty and they seem really nice.” Cayley added much later in the discussion, “most of [the Princesses] are really pretty and they are usually nice.” The participants also conveyed the core principle of the feminine beauty ideal in that physical attractiveness equals social rewards and a positive relationship to the characters. Throughout both focus groups, the participants formed a solidified understanding that because the Princesses were “pretty,” they must also be “nice.” I inquired as to why the participants’ thought the Princesses were nice. This question suggested that the girls use critical thinking in order to provide examples from the films to prove that the Princesses were nice. Jade responded that Ariel was nice because “she has a bunch of friends, she is friends with Flounder and then there is a boy that starts liking her, and usually boys don’t like girls that are mean.” Jade was able to connect the idea that in order for Ariel to have friends,

she must possess qualities that make her likeable, and, in turn, a nice person; otherwise, she would not have any friends. Furthermore, Kara suggested that, “Prince Eric likes Ariel [and] he likes her because she’s nice.”

I found it was difficult for the participants to provide reasons for and examples of Princesses being “nice.” I also discovered that the participants were unable to connect beauty to niceness through examples from the film. This is an important discovery to explore. It does not mean the participants are unable to think critically because they could not provide concrete answers. As stated previously, an important component of CML is that children may not have the correct answers to questions, or even be able to come up with answers. Instead, by asking these challenging questions, it provides an opportunity for children to think about their preconceived notions of media. I suggest that with more repetitive exposure and experience with CML in various forms of media, children will likely be able to further develop their critical thinking and opinions.

I concluded the first focus group by asking the participants if they believed Disney Princesses were a realistic portrayal of what real girls are like. The uniform response of “no” was given, with alternative views as to why, which were very interesting. Jade provided a solid answer stating, “I don’t think girls are really like that because [they] aren’t Princesses. Girls don’t dress as fancy and stuff like that; they kind of just buy casual clothes and jeans and stuff.” Brittney’s answer went beyond physical looks as she suggested, “I think girls are not really like that, because some girls can be mean, and a lot of them can be rude, some girls will knock you down on purpose or won’t let you play a game.” Kara provided a very interesting answer by saying real girls are not like the Princesses, “because most girls wear running shoes and the

Princesses don't." Participants were using links to their personal lives to provide insightful answers that challenged Disney's forms of femininity.

The existing academic literature critiques a stereotypical femininity, which appears regularly in Disney animated films: the Princesses are almost always passive, domesticated, and fulfill feminine beauty ideals. For example, the Princesses are defined as "very kind, graceful, good-natured, beautiful, musical, innocent young girls" (Davis, 2006, pp. 101). However, I argue that a stereotypical femininity in Disney films is only problematic because Disney offers such a narrow view of femininity. I argue that Disney should incorporate different and multiple versions of femininity to help young girls navigate through contradictory constructions of gender identity in their own lives. I believe that Disney should offer alternative positive forms of femininity in their main characters that will aid girls in understanding there are alternate meanings of femininity. Although Disney has made an attempt to do this, by introducing the film *Brave* (Docter, Drumm, Lasseter, Andrews, & Chapman) in 2012, the participants were not familiar with that film, nor were they interested in talking about it. I inquired if the participants believed all young girls liked Disney movies and Princesses. Jade was first to answer, suggesting, "No, some girls don't. I think it depends on their age because some people think they are too old to watch it." Kara also said no, "because some girls don't like Princesses or some girls like the boy stuff." Cayley added, "some people don't like the characters, or they don't like any of the characters so they don't watch them." Lastly, Brittney added, "It depends on their opinion on the Princesses. They might not like them or they might think they are cool." It was clear that the participants understood that not all young girls are Disney fans because of different points of view and interests. I was pleased to note that the participants were able to understand why girls might not enjoy Disney or the Princesses as this further highlights their critical thinking skills.

They understood that these media texts contained elements that may not appeal to everyone and are, in fact, socially constructed and, therefore, may not appeal to everyone.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

This study combined my interest in Disney animated films with my passion for working with children. Eventually, it turned into a Master's thesis that resulted in exploring Disney animated female characters with young girls. I began this research by exploring the following question: How might critical media literacy skills create a space for discussion and promote awareness of ideologies in Disney films for girls? In order to do so, I used critical theory and critical media literacy as a theoretical framework to understand how to shape this study. It was important to incorporate feminist theory, specifically pertaining to children's films and media literacy, as this turned out to be a significant part of my study. I developed a strong understanding of critical media literacy and how it pertains to Disney, in that Disney films can be better educational tools for children if adults provide an inquisitive approach to media literacy, while simultaneously watching films with children. An important aspect of this study was conducting an in-depth literature review in order to explore the existing research on Disney and CML, as the existing literature served as the platform for focus group questions.

I adopted feminist qualitative methodologies paired with qualitative methods in my structuring of two separate focus group sessions. Participants were recruited via the snowball effect in and around the Brock University community, and four female participants between 7 and 11 years old agreed, with parental consent, to participate in my study. The first focus group was designed to gain a basic understanding of the young participants' grasp of critical media literacy and Disney in general. The second focus group was more heavily reliant on collaboratively watching Disney film clips and then providing a question period to raise interesting conversations around the female characters. The three film clips we watched were from *Cinderella* (Disney, Geronimi, Jackson, & Luske, 1950), *The Little Mermaid* (Ashman,

Musker, & Clements, 1989), and *The Princess and the Frog* (Del Vecho, Clements, & Musker, 2009). I watched each clip with the participants and then we had an open discussion pertaining to the clip; questions were posed in order to open up a space for critical thinking, leaving room for the young girls to ask their own questions. The data analysis was quite challenging due to the abundance of information; however, three main themes were derived from the data. The first theme that emerged focused on the evil female characters and their uniform description as “mean and ugly.” This topic paralleled the existing literature of powerful Disney female characters often being evil and ugly; however, it was evident that the participants did classify specific characters as evil and mean, yet they were unable to associate feminine power with evil. The second theme explored heterosexuality, in which the participants did not share any conversation that deviated from a heteronormative understanding of love and relationships. The main topics discussed by the participants resorted around love and marriage between the prince and Princesses. The final theme provided the opinions of young girls’ views of Disney Princesses, with specific attention paid to the physical appearance of the Princesses. The discussion mostly revolved around the Princesses being “pretty and nice.” Each theme included elements of the participants engaging in critical thinking and challenging the media images that we watched together. Overall, I argue the four female participants who participated in the research process and aided me in doing my thesis study were, in fact, critical and were able to engage critical thinking simply by being asked questions pertaining to their opinions and what they were watching.

Extra Critical Thinking

The purpose of this thesis was to create a space to encourage young girls to engage in critical thinking when watching Disney animated films, and specifically to engage them in critical thinking in relation to Disney’s female characters. The analysis section revealed the

participants' exploration with critical thinking in terms of female characters. However, after reviewing the conversations I had with the girls, it is clear that there were many other examples of the participants engaging in critical thinking that may not pertain specifically to the female characters, and I feel these examples are important to include here. I explained the importance of simply asking questions and the learning curve that can be established from being inquisitive. The conclusion of the second focus group included a section of wrap-up questions I asked in order to gain an overall sense of the participants' research experience. I began the first focus group by asking if any of the participants ever collaboratively watched films or television accompanied by an adult or older figure. A uniform response of "no" was received from the participants, and each girl agreed that she had never asked questions pertaining to the films unless she was unclear of something happening in the plot, or to comment on liking a pretty dress or nice hair. By the end of the second focus group (it is important to note that the second focus group took place 2 months after the first focus group), the participants had an array of information about becoming more critical to share. I inquired why it is important to ask questions while watching media, and the answers I received were very concrete and impressive. Cayley claimed it was important to ask questions because, "it makes us think about other people's opinions or what the Princesses do and look like." My main goal was to get young girls to share their opinions, which I could then contribute on their behalf as I argue children are experts of their own lives and culture. Brittney provided a very solidified and intelligent comment about the experience of being exposed to CML:

when I used to watch movies, I don't really ask questions, I just watch it. But now that I am here I want to ask more questions and do more of that because it makes me think more and makes me think of questions of what I am watching.

Brittney's response gave me a feeling of joy and accomplishment, in that I was able to introduce CML to these young girls and, in turn, have their brilliant opinions to share with the academic world. To further explain their understanding of participating in my thesis, Cayley stated, "it is important to ask questions about movies when we watch them because we can learn better about them!" Furthermore, Kara added that it is important to ask questions about films because, "it makes us learn more about the movies and figure out what the movies are about and why they are the way they are." It was refreshing to hear the participants' solid answers about becoming more critical viewers and how they really enjoyed the experience of participating in my research. I was pleased to hear their positive comments about inquiry-based analysis of films. I argue in this thesis that the easiest way to guide children to become critical viewers is simply to ask questions and offer answers to questions that they ask.

Limitations

Due to restrictions of time and cost, there are areas of this Master's thesis that could have been strengthened to provide a more in-depth look at critical media literacy and Disney. A major improvement would be to increase the number of participants. By having several focus groups or a larger number of participants per focus group, there could have been more discussion and alternative points of view from multiple participants. Another facet of the research method that could be improved is the diversity of the sample. My intentions were to have a diversified sample to provide different interpretations from possible different perspectives. However, based on the replies to recruitment, this diversity did not happen. A more diversified sample would introduce interesting points of view from girls who may experience and interpret Disney female characters in different ways compared to the all-white sample that I had for my study. Moreover, an interesting alternative approach to this study would be to include boys in the sample in order

to obtain their points of view on Disney female characters and their interactions and understandings of females from viewing Disney animated films. It would be interesting to have both males and females in the same focus group to explore the same topics, but also including views from both sexes on the same topic.

A key element of feminist methodologies is the element of researcher reflexivity, including reflecting on his/her personal position in the research process. Inevitably, all researcher social and cultural positioning affect the research process, methods, and analysis. Personally, I view myself as a middle-class, educated, white female researcher. For this particular research process, I needed to reflect on my position, views, biases, and understandings of Disney and ideologies in Disney films. It was a rather difficult process to understand my own position, as I grew up with Disney as a key source of happiness in my youth. However, as I became more educated throughout university I began to consume Disney, and media in general, with a much more critical eye. As a critical viewer, I now find enjoyment in Disney films; however, I am constantly questioning images and ideologies presented in the films. This placed me in an interesting position to fulfil the research process, as I knew I would be discussing Disney and the joy it brings to young girls lives. After my analysis, I realized that my previous love for Disney may have caused me to be less critical on the young girls opinions towards their answers and feelings towards Disney female characters. In university I was blatantly told that Disney films could only have negative effects on children and that Disney was a terrible form of entertainment. This discussion left very little room to further explore the possible benefits and was very one-sided. I did not agree or feel this was a topic that was clearly explored, and because of this experience I tried to remain away of my own biases and worked to ensure that I was not pushing them on the young girls in my focus groups. I was sure not to cross the fine line between

pleasure and critique for the young girls. My position, specifically towards my understanding and enjoyment of Disney, allowed space for critical conversation with the participants without jading their perceptions and joy of Disney. I attribute my consciousness of this issue and the balance between critique and entertainment to my position as a feminist researcher and previous experiences that allowed me to be aware of the importance of this balance.

Future Research

The aforementioned ideas to strengthen the study provide directions for future research. There are many studies done involving Disney and children; however, I strongly believe it is important for all future research to include children's perspectives and points of view. Including children in the research process and doing research with children provides an in-depth insight that is impossible to attain otherwise. It is vital to incorporate children's points of view, as I argue children are experts in their own lives.

Concluding Thoughts

I encourage parents, teachers, older siblings, and anyone watching movies with children to ask questions that will cause children to think critically and ask their own questions. I asked a simple question, such as, "Who do you believe makes these Disney movies?" Of course, Walt Disney was the first response from the participants, but I encouraged the participants to really think about the films. By doing so, the girls took time to consider who made Disney films, and Jade came up with the notion that "boys must make the movies like *Cars* (Anderson, Porter, Lasseter, Ranft, 2006), and girls make the Princess movies." Because of the young age of the participants, it was fascinating to hear this response from a group of 7 to 11-year-olds, and the blatant gender roles that they observed: males make boy films, and females make girl films. This transgressed into a conversation about the male dominated entertainment business and how the

participants' preconceived gendered understanding of filmmakers were incorrect. A simple question, such as the one aforementioned, opened a very interesting conversation topic that allowed the participants to learn something new and challenged their preconceived notions of gender roles. It is our responsibility as adults to help children recognize how gender is constructed and entrenched through media texts, such as Disney. Media bombardment places immense pressure on children to conform to society's expectations of normative gender roles; by simply asking questions and encouraging children to question media images, we can help relieve some of the pressure today's children are facing. It is important to remember that children may not always have the answers to the questions we ask. Instead, by simply asking questions it encourages young people to think about what they are consuming and, in turn, ask their own questions. It is also vital to remember that Disney is a form of entertainment that provides immense pleasure to children. Rather than ruining this pleasure by labeling Disney "bad," it is perhaps more important and relevant to their lives to offer tools that will enhance their ability to be critical consumers of the biggest media conglomerate on the block.

Critical media literacy helps us to see that not everything that happens in the movies is real. I, thus, conclude this thesis with the same question that I used to conclude my final focus group discussion. Do you think we are all going to be Princesses when we grow up? I leave you with the answer from four very intelligent young girls, "probably not!"

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Focus Group 1 Question Guide

- Who is a fan of Disney?
- What comes to mind when you think about Disney?
- What about Disney do you like?
- Is there anything you don't like about Disney?
- What is your favourite Disney movie and why?
- Is there a Disney movie that you don't like? Why?
- Why do you think Disney makes movies?
- Is there anything that Disney can teach us with their movies?
- Tell me about your favourite Disney female character and why she is your favourite.
- Tell me about a character you do not like, and why you do not like that character.
- Do you think all little girls like Disney?
- Which kind of girls like Disney? Which kind of girls do not like Disney?
- Do you watch Disney movies with Parents or older siblings?
 - If you do, do you take time to talk about the movies after? What is said?
- Who do you think created the characters on the screen? And for what reasons?
- Why do you think so many girls like Disney princesses?
- What is it about the princesses that makes them so likeable?
- Does anyone not like the princesses at all, and why?
- How would you describe Disney princesses (physically)?
- How could you describe the personality and behaviours of the Disney princesses?
- Are they all the same or what makes the princesses differ?
- Is there any specific things about the princesses you don't like?
- If you could change one thing about your favourite princess what would it be?
- Who can a Disney princess be compared to in real life?
- Do you think the Disney princess' are an accurate portrayal of females?
- Do you have any questions or extra comments?

Appendix B

Focus Group 2 Question Guide

Cinderella Clip:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I6SdCDpvTnw>

The following clip we are going to watch is from Cinderella. Cinderella's friends the two mice, just got all the other animals to help them sew Cinderella a new dress so she can have a chance to go to the ball. Cinderella's two step sisters are about to leave for the ball and Cinderella comes walking down the stairs in her new gown.

- Who can explain what is happening in this clip?
- Why does Cinderella want to go to the ball?
- How was Cinderella dressed before the ball? Why?
 - Cleaning –
 - What is her job? Is that her only job?
- Why does no body want Cinderella to go to the ball?
- What is your opinion on how the step sisters treated Cinderella?
 - Does this reflect something you might see in your real life?
- How come the step sisters and step mother have control over Cinderella?
 - Do you think they have power over Cinderella?
 - Why?
- What is the point of going to the ball? Why do all three girls want to go to the ball?
 - *To meet the prince and fall in love*
 - Why did they have to dress up in such fancy dresses to go?
 - Do you think the prince would have liked them in their regular clothes?

The Little Mermaid Clip:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VyFVG4VfPmg>

This clip is the song that Ursula sings when she is underwater with Ariel. She is explain to Ariel that she will do her a favour, because Ursula has special powers. She decides that she will grant Ariel a chance to have feet in order to meet the prince and make him fall in love with her. However, Ursula will only let that happen if Ariel trades her voice to get new feet.

- Who has the most power in this clip? – Is her power good or bad?
- Explain to me what Ursula looks like? Why does she look this way?
- Why does Ariel want feet?
 - *To meet the prince and fall in love*
- Why does Ariel agree to give up her voice?
- If Ariel wants feet to meet the prince, then she must give up her voice. How is she supposed to make the prince fall in love with her if she has no voice? What is she supposed to do?

The Princess and the Frog Clip

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=woP1GRsvfjg&list=UUakvzbwEAXA-iitDW0a5sFw&index=27>

- Tell me about Tiana?

- What was her mother's dream for her? Why is this her dream?
- What is Tiana's dream?
- What makes her different than the other Princesses?
- Why does she want her own restaurant?

Second Clip

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C6i0R7Oxk5M>

- How did they turn to humans?
- What happens after they got married?
- How did Tiana's dream come true? How?
- Does Tiana's story end the same as the other Princesses?
 - Yes- falls in love/gets married to prince
 - No- works at restaurant
- Tell me what you think about Tiana choosing to work after getting married?
- Does this make her different than the other princesses? How/why?
- Do you think she would have been able to open her dream restaurant without getting married? Why?

Overall Wrap-up Questions:

- Why do the princesses want to meet a prince?
- How come all the powerful women are mean?
- Did you notice anything else about the powerful women?
- Of the three clips we just watched, would you change anything about one? What would it be?
- What kind of audience do you think these films are made for? Be specific.
- Why do you think I am asking you all these questions about these movies?
- Why is it important to ask questions?